

ENGAGING SOCIOLOGY

How to Read a Research Table

A statistical table is a researcher's labor-saving device. Quantitative data presented in tabular form are clearer and more concise than the same information presented in several written paragraphs. A good table has clear signposts to help the reader avoid confusion. For instance, Table 2.1 shows many of the main features of a table, and the boxes in the margins explain how to read each feature.

TITLE: The title provides information on the major topic and variables in the table.

"Educational Attainment by Selected Characteristics: 2015"

MARGINAL TABS: In examining the numbers in the table, try working from the outside in. The marginals, the figures at the margins of the table, often provide summary information.

In this table, the first column of numbers is headed "Population (1,000)," indicating—by thousands—the total number of people in each category who were part of the database. The columns to the right indicate—by percentages—the level of educational attainment for each category.

Table 2.1 Educational Attainment by Selected Characteristics: 2015, for Persons 25 Years Old and Over, Reported in Thousands

Characteristic	Population (1,000)	Percentage of Population—Highest Level					
		Not a High School Graduate	High School Graduate	Some College, but No Degree	Associate's Degree ¹	Bachelor's Degree	Advanced Degree
Total persons	212,312	14.3	26.5	17.7	10.0	20.5	12.0
Age							
25–34 yrs. old	43,006	12.5	22.5	18.5	10.4	25.3	10.9
35–54 yrs. old	82,715	14.0	24.9	15.8	10.6	21.9	12.8
55–64 yrs. old	86,411	15.9	30.1	16.4	9.0	16.9	11.9

HEADNOTE (or Subtitle): Many tables will have a headnote or subtitle under the title, giving information relevant to understanding the table or units in the table.

For this table, the reader is informed that it includes all persons 25 years old and over and the units will be reported in thousands.

HEADINGS AND STUBS: Tables generally have one or two levels of headings under the title and headnotes. These instruct the reader about what is in the columns below.

In this table, the headings indicate the level of education achieved so that the reader can identify the percentage with a specified level of education.

The table also has a stub: the far-left column under "Characteristic." This lists the items that are being compared according to the categories found in the headings. In this case, the stub indicates age, sex, and race or ethnicity.

CELLS: To make more detailed comparisons, examine specific cells in the body of the table. These are the boxes that hold the numbers or percentages.

In this table, the cells contain data on educational achievement by age, sex, and race/ethnicity (for Asians, Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics).