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Stata tip 82: Grounds for grids on graphs

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Grids of horizontal or vertical lines within graphs were greatly used in the past, but more recently have been greatly disapproved. The need for grids as guidelines in preparing graphs has disappeared as computers have displaced people as graph constructors. Their use for precise look-up of particular values has diminished as more datasets become electronically accessible. To present tastes, past compendiums of graph types, such as [Brinton \(1914\)](#) and [Karsten \(1923\)](#), groan with the weight of heavy grids in example after example. The low point for grids came with the dismissal by [Tufte \(2001\)](#) of dark grid lines as “chartjunk”, but he also emphasized that light grid lines could be helpful. The arguments of Tufte, [Cleveland \(1994\)](#), [Kosslyn \(2006\)](#), and others, and the flexibility of modern graphic technology, imply that grids should and can be subtle and subdued. Ideally, grids will be just noticeable so that they can be tuned in and out of attention by graph readers.

The grounds for grids are pragmatic and aesthetic—they can be useful and they can be pleasing. There is some room for disagreement on the first ground and much room on the second. The aim of this tip is not to change your mind on how you should prepare your own graphs, but more to underline some of the possibilities offered by Stata.

Stata provides support for grids, although you may easily not have noticed. For example, with the `auto.dta` dataset, Stata’s default `s2color` graph scheme, and the canonical graph

```
. scatter mpg weight
```

subtle grid lines appear for `mpg` values 10, 20, 30, and 40. That also is true with the `sj` scheme used in the *Stata Journal*. These grid lines are associated with the corresponding axis labels. If you do not want them, you can turn them off with an option, such as `ylabel(, nogrid)`. Grid lines can also be associated with axis ticks: more usually, you would need to turn those on with an option, such as `ytick(15(10)35, grid)`—not that this is an especially good idea. Grid lines in the informal wider sense may also be added through options such as `yline()`. What goes for the *y* axis also goes for the *x* axis, at least as far as `twoway` is concerned.

To use grids effectively and tastefully, it is essential to be able to tune line width, color, and style, as well as horizontal or vertical position. Stata makes this easier by providing, at least in principle, `grid`, `major_grid`, and `minor_grid` *linestyles*; see [G] *linestyle*. In practice, these three need not be distinct, depending precisely on the graph scheme in use. Independently of that, you can tweak grid lines as desired through standard line options.

As a first example, let us do what [Arbuthnott \(1710\)](#) did not do: plot his data on the ratio of males and females christened in London. The main statistical point for these data is that the average ratio is definitely not 1, as researchers would now typically flag with a significance test or confidence interval. The fuller history is enlightening and entertaining and can be found in many sources, including [Stigler \(1986\)](#) and [Hacking \(2006\)](#). Plotting these data was inspired by [Friendly \(2007\)](#). A data file is provided with the electronic media for this issue as `arbuthnott.dta`.

```
. use arbuthnott
```

The obvious reference lines for a time-series plot of the ratio are the line of equality, $y = 1$, and the line of the mean, $y = 1.066918$. Some experimenting indicates that `yline()` by itself produces rather stark lines, whereas `yline(, grid)` produces very subdued ones. One compromise is to specify `lcolor(gs12)`, thus making use of gray scale ([Cox 2009](#)). Adding these lines would make the graph appear a little busy given the grid lines provided by default to match the `ylabels` at 1, 1.05, 1.1, and 1.15, so we use `nogrid` to turn three of those off. Figure 1 is the result.

```
. line ratio year, yline(1.066918 1, lstyle(grid) lcolor(gs12))
> ylabel(, nogrid angle(h)) xtitle("")
```

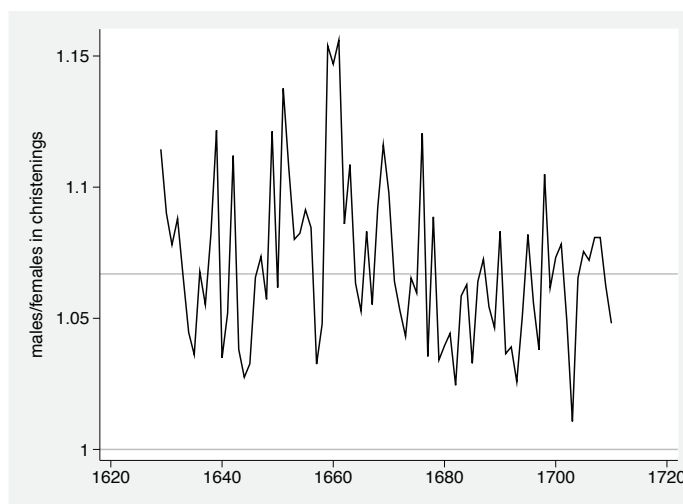


Figure 1. Arbuthnott's data on sex ratio in London christenings. The use of reference lines is shown in grid style.

Grids can be especially useful on scatterplots. Consider these data on city temperatures in the United States:

```
. sysuse citytemp
```

First, we create Celsius versions of each temperature variable:

```
. clonevar tempjanC = tempjan
. replace tempjanC = (5/9) * (tempjanC - 32)
. clonevar tempjulC = tempjuly
. replace tempjulC = (5/9) * (tempjulC - 32)
```

A natural reference line, which we make thicker than the default, is at the freezing point 0°C (32°F). We add more grid lines at other temperatures so that both axes are gridded. A major twist is that lighter and darker are inverted: the grid lines are white and the plot region and axes are set to a light gray, `gs14`. Figure 2 shows what this produces.

```
. scatter tempjulC tempjanC, ms(oh)
> xline(0, lstyle(grid) lcolor(white) lwidth(*1.5))
> xlabel(, grid glcolor(white)) ylabel(, angle(h) glcolor(white))
> plotregion(color(gs14)) graphregion(color(white)) xscale(lcolor(gs14))
> yscale(lcolor(gs14)) note({c 176}Celsius) ms(oh)
```

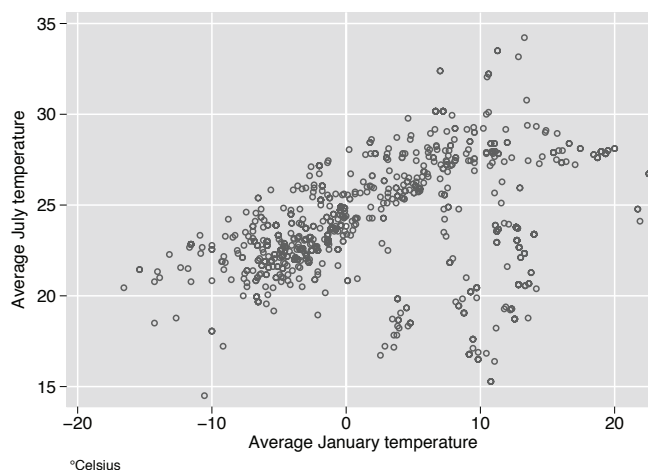


Figure 2. City temperature data for the United States. Grid lines are shown for both variables, and lighter and darker are inverted.

Such a look to graphs is in conscious imitation of a look very popular in the R community, particularly using its `ggplot2` package as devised and documented by Wickham (2009). Aside from that, the provision of grid lines is thus a natural way of emphasizing zeros or other key levels on one or both variables. Stata users sometimes want to move the axes so that they intersect at the origin (0, 0), just as they may well have been taught to do when young. Stata will not do that if either variable is ever negative, but clear grid lines provide a way to emphasize such levels while also ensuring that the data are not obscured by the axes or their associated labels, ticks, and titles.

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