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THE STATA JOURNAL

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Stata tip 102: Highlighting specific bars

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A frequent need when drawing a bar or dot chart is to highlight a subset of observations while keeping the overall sort order. The stipulation of keeping the overall sort order is what provides the challenge here, because otherwise we could just add subdivision by another variable to the command, as when distinguishing foreign cars among those with the best repair record:

```
. sysuse auto  
. graph hbar (asis) mpg if rep78 == 5, over(make, sort(1) descending)  
. graph hbar (asis) mpg if rep78 == 5, over(make, sort(1) descending)  
> over(foreign) nofill
```

Figure 1 shows the graphs for these two commands.

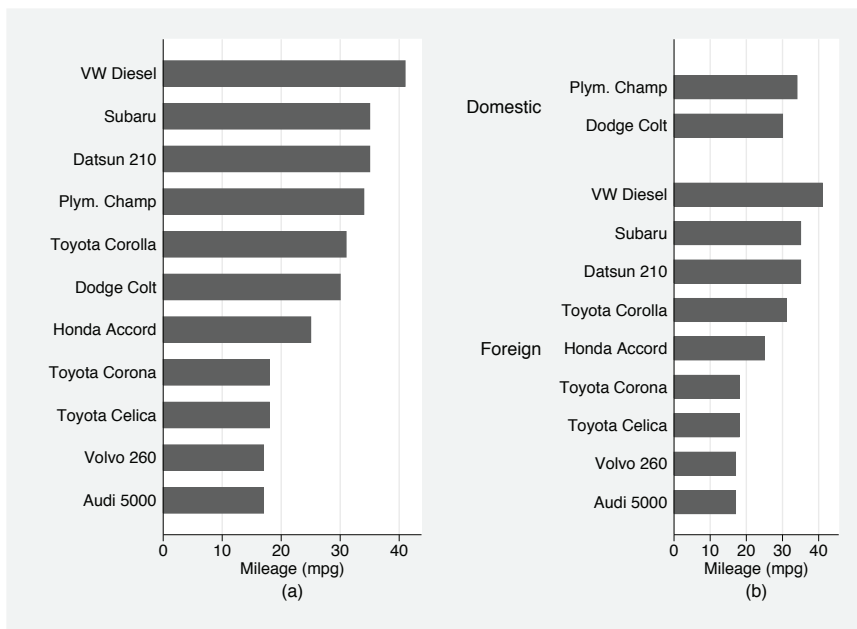


Figure 1

In figure 1(a), the ordering is within all the observations specified. In figure 1(b), the extra option `over(foreign)` subdivides observations according to the further variable

`foreign`. Note also the crucial detail of `nofill`. This can be a useful kind of graph, but it is not what we want here.

Let us suppose we have data on basin (catchment or watershed) areas for various large rivers in the world, and we want to show where the Mississippi falls in the rank order for the very largest basins. Some example data from [Allen \(1997\)](#) are included with the media for this issue.

```
. use rivers
```

Figure 2 as a first graph shows that the Mississippi ranks third on area of basin in this dataset, after the Amazon and Zaire.

```
. graph hbar (asis) area if area >= 1000, over(name, sort(1) descending)
```

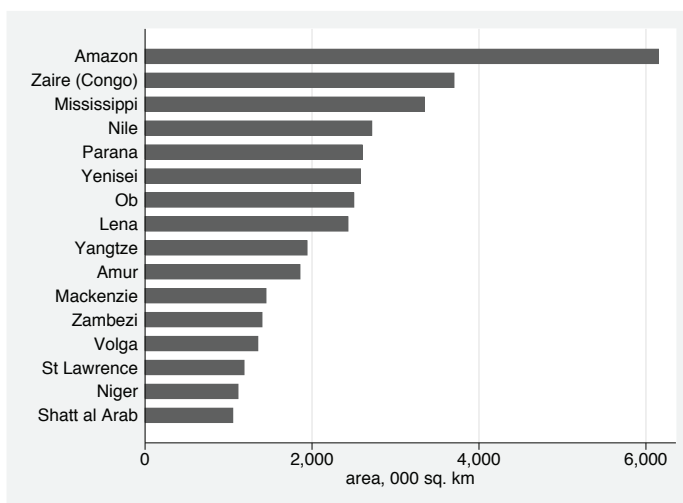


Figure 2

Highlighting a particular bar means giving it a different color. Some acquaintance with the bar chart commands shows that they are willing to combine bars for different variables, which will be assigned different colors. Knowing this, we simply need to put data for two subsets, the Mississippi and the others, into two different variables. `separate` (see [D] `separate`) is a command designed for precisely this purpose. For other graphical applications of `separate`, see [Cox \(2005\)](#). It is naturally also possible to use `generate` directly.

```
. separate area, by(name == "Mississippi")
```

In this example, the equality supplied to `by()` is either false or true, numerically 0 or 1, and so `separate` creates two new variables, `area0` and `area1`.

```
. graph hbar (asis) area0 area1 if area >= 1000, nofill
> over(name, sort(area) descending) legend(off) ytitle("`': var label area`'")
```

We are plotting bars for values that are nonmissing on `area0` and missing on `area1`, or vice versa. But `graph` plots no bars when values are missing. This is easy to fix: `nofill` gets us the intended effect. In this case, we suppressed the legend, imagining that, depending on the purpose, we could add a title for a presentation—as, say

```
title(Mississippi ranks third in catchment area)
```

or underline the message of the graph in informative text supplied in a text or word processor. Because two response variables are being shown on the same graph, we have to step in to provide an informative *y*-axis title, in this case by automating use of the variable label for `area`. Nothing stops us from just providing an axis title explicitly, as when no such variable label has been defined.

In principle, using `stack` should have the same effect as using `nofill`. In practice, small complications can exist if there are other missing values in the data; these complications are fixable with an appropriate `if` exclusion.

The main problem now being solved, we could clearly heighten the contrast by adding `bar(1, bfcOLOR(none))`. Figure 3 shows the graph after that tweak.

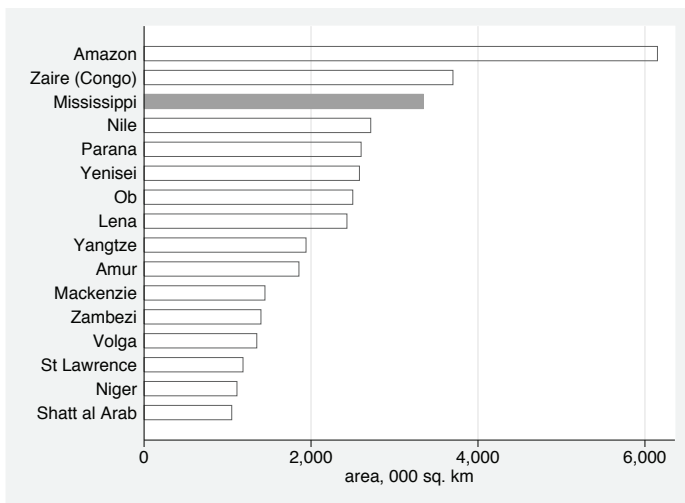


Figure 3

Similar needs are met by variations on this theme.

In our example, the subset to be highlighted is a single observation, but nothing depends on that being true.

Equally, three or more subsets could be distinguished. For a more elaborate subdivision, we might want a legend, although there is a trade-off: the more complicated the design, for which a legend becomes necessary, the less the impact of the graph is likely to be.

The examples all are based on showing values `asis`. If graphs of this kind are needed, but for means or other summary statistics, it is often easiest to `collapse` or `contract` the dataset first and then use `separate` and `graph hbar (asis)`.

The same device can be used with `graph bar`, `graph dot`, or various subcommands of `twoway`, such as `twoway bar`. In practice, when we want this, the individual observations include names that are informative, so horizontal alignment makes those names more readable. If `graph dot` were to be used, we should consider heightening the contrast by adding, for example, `marker(2, msize(*3))`.

References

- Allen, P. A. 1997. *Earth Surface Processes*. Oxford: Blackwell Science.
- Cox, N. J. 2005. Stata tip 27: Classifying data points on scatter plots. *Stata Journal* 5: 604–606.