# tbl.typ: a tbl-like preprocessor for Typst and tablex

Version 0.0.1 Max Rees 2023

# Contents

1.	Introduction	3
2.	Region options	4
	Format specifications	
	3.1. Column classifiers	
	3.2. Column modifiers	7
4.	Data	10
	4.1. Special input lines	10
	4.2. Table entries	11
	4.3. Special table entries	11
	4.4. Text blocks	
5.	Differences from traditional tbl	13
	Known issues	
	Examples	
	References	

# 1. Introduction

Typst [1] is "a new markup-based typesetting system that is powerful and easy to learn." While Typst provides a built-in table() function, it does not currently support more advanced features such as row spans and column spans, fine-grain control of borders, or complex cell alignments. Pg Biel's tablex project [2] provides many of these features. However, it remains the case that writing a table using either table() or tablex() can require rather verbose syntax.

The tbl.typ project is an effort to allow the expression of rich tables in Typst using a more terse syntax. This syntax comes from a UNIX heritage: the tbl preprocessor which designed for use with the traditional TROFF typesetting system [3] [4] [5]. Important differences between the syntax of traditional tbl and tbl.typ are noted later in this document.

After importing the library using #import "tbl.typ", the basic format of a table when using tbl.typ is the following:

```
```tbl
Format specifications .
Data
```
```

The two main components of this syntax are:

• Format specifications. This describes the layout of the table in terms of the number and style of columns for each row.

The last line of the format specifications must end in a period (.). This is the separator between the two sections.

• *Data*. This is the content that will fill each cell of the table. Generally every input line in this section corresponds to a row in the table, though there are exceptions noted later. Cells are separated by the tab option which defaults to a TAB character.

# 2. Region options

In addition to the overall table syntax itself, you may specify region options that control the parsing and styling of the table as a whole using a "show-everything" rule prior to the tables you would like to control. For example:

```
#show: tbl.template.with(
  allbox: true,
  tab: "|",
)
```

The following options are recognized:

| <pre>auto-lines, allbox</pre> | Like box, but also draw a line between every cell if true. This is the same option from tablex.                   |  |  |
|-------------------------------|---|--|--|
|                               | Default: false cf. Example 10, 11, 12, 13.  |  |  |
| box,                          | If true, draw a line around the entire table.   |  |  |
| frame                         | Default: false cf. Example 1, 2, 3, 4, 5.   |  |  |
| breakable,                    | If true, the table can span multiple pages if necessary.  |  |  |
| nokeep                        | Default: false  |  |  |
| <pre>center, centre</pre>     | Aliases for a tbl-align value of center.  |  |  |
| decimalpoint                  | The string used to separate the integral part of a number from the fractional part. Used in N-classified columns. |  |  |
|                               | Default: "."  |  |  |
| doublebox,                    | Like box, but also draw a second line around the entire table if true.  |  |  |
| doubleframe                   | Default: false cf. Example 14.  |  |  |
| font                          | The font for the table. Can be overridden later by the f() column modifier.                                       |  |  |
|                               | Default: "Times"  n.b. all tables in this document are formatted with the New Computer Modern font.               |  |  |

| header-rows   | The number of rows at the beginning of the table to consider part of the "header" for the purposes of repeat-header. This option is also controlled by .TH rows in the table data.                              |
|---------------|---|
|               | Default: 1  |
| leading       | The vertical spacing / leading to apply to table cells. Can be overridden later by the v() column modifier.   |
| macros        | A dictionary of (name, function) pairs that can be used with column modifier m().   |
|               | Default: (:)  |
| pad           | This is the padding used for each cell, for use with the Typst pad element function. The left and right keys can be overridden using a numeric column modifier.   |
|               | Default: (left: 0.75em, right: 0.75em, top: 3pt, bottom: 3pt)   |
| repeat-header | If breakable is true and this option is true, then the table header controlled by header-rows will be re-displayed on each subsequent page. This option is also controlled by .TH rows in the table data.       |
|               | Default: false  |
| stroke,       | How to draw all lines in the table.   |
| linesize      | Default: [1pt]  |
| tab           | The string delimiter that separates different cells within a given row of the table data.   |
|               | Default: "\t" (a TAB character) cf. Example 14. Most tables in this document use " " (a vertical bar) for readability purposes, though this should not be confused with the column classifier of the same name. |
| tbl-align     | How to align the table as a whole.  |
|               | Default: left   |

# 3. Format specifications

The format specifications section controls the layout and style of cells within rows and columns of the table.

Each comma or new line of format specification begins a new row definition. Within each row definition, encountering a column classifier character denotes a new column in the table. The classifier may be followed by any number of column modifiers, some of which may have required arguments enclosed in parentheses.

# 3.1. Column classifiers

The following column classifiers are recognized. They may be given as either capital or lowercase.

| L | Left align.   |
|---|---|
| R | Right align.  |
| C | Center align.   |
| N | Numerically align.  |
|   | All cells with this classifier in the current column are centered with respect to an <i>alignment point</i> , which is determined according to the following rules: |
|   | • One position after the leftmost occurrence of the <i>non-printing</i> input token &, if any is present.   |
|   | • Otherwise, the rightmost occurrence of the <b>decimalpoint</b> string that immediately precedes a digit.  |
|   | • Otherwise, the rightmost digit.   |
|   | • Otherwise, the content is instead centered with respect to the column as a whole.   |
|   | The alignment point is centered horizontally with respect to the column as a whole.   |
|   | cf. Example 3, 4, 8, 9, 10, 14.   |
| S | This cell is column-spanned by the previous cell to the left in the current row.  |
|   | The corresponding table data entries should be empty.   |

cf. Example 4, 5, 10, 12, 14.

| • (caret)       | This cell is row-spanned by the corresponding cell in the previous row above.                               |  |
|-----------------|---|--|
|                 | The corresponding table data entries should be empty. cf. Example 1.  |  |
| (underscore),   | This cell contains a vertically-centered horizontal rule.   |  |
| - (hyphen)      | The corresponding table data entries should be empty.   |  |
| = (equals sign) | Same as, but draw a double horizontal rule instead.   |  |
|                 | The corresponding table data entries should be empty.   |  |
| (vertical bar)  | This classifier does not actually begin a new column, but rather indicates the location of a vertical line. |  |

If placed at the beginning of a row definition, the line is drawn to the left of the first cell in that row. Otherwise, it is drawn to the right of

7

# 3.2. Column modifiers

tbl.typ

The following column modifiers are recognized. They may be given as either capital or lowercase.

the current cell in that row.

cf. Example 1, 3, 4, 5, 8.

| b  | Bold text using the Typst strong element function.   |  |  |  |
|--|--|--|--|--|
| d  | Down — set the vertical alignment to bottom.   |  |  |  |
| <b>E</b> qualize the width of all columns with this modifier to the maximum among those columns. |  |  |  |  |
|  | This overrides modifier x.   |  |  |  |
| f()  | Font name to use is given in parentheses.  |  |  |  |
|  | <ul> <li>f(B) is an alias for the b modifier.</li> <li>f(I) is an alias for the i modifier.</li> <li>f(BI) is an alias for providing both of the above modifiers.</li> </ul> |  |  |  |
|  | cf. Example 12.  |  |  |  |
| i  | Italicize text using the Typst emph element function.  |  |  |  |

Macro (function) to apply to each corresponding cell. The macros must be scoped using the macros region option.

The macro currently only receives a single argument: the content of the cell. A future version may also pass the position of the cell in terms of row number and column number.

**o(...)** Fill color for the cell is given in parentheses.

cf. Example 11.

**Point size of the font is modified according to the argument in parentheses.** 

If the argument begins with a + or -, then the argument is added or subtracted respectively with respect to the current size.

The argument may be suffixed by a unit. If no unit is specified, **pt** is assumed. Valid units are:

- pt, p: points.
- mm: millimeters.
- cm, c: centimeters.
- in, i: inches.
- em, m: 1em corresponds to the current font size.
- en, n: one *en* equals half of an em.
- P: six *picas* equals one inch.
- M: 100 of these equals one em.

cf. Example 8, 12, 14.

**T**op — set the vertical alignment to **top**.

cf. Example 12.

"Stagger" the affected cells so that they appear **between** the current row and the previous one above.

cf. Example 7.

Vertical spacing (leading) is modified according to the argument in parentheses.

The length argument provided is in the same format as p(...), with a default unit of pt and + / - relative adjustments supported.

Width of the column is guaranteed to be at least as big as the argument in parentheses, which acts as a *minimum width*.

The length argument provided supports the same units as p(...), with a default unit of en. However, relative adjustments are not supported.

This overrides modifier  $\mathbf{x}$ .

cf. Example 12, 13.

Expand the width of the column to 1fr, which will consume all of the remaining horizontal space on the page or in the current container. Applying this modifier to multiple columns will divide that remaining space evenly between them.

This overrides modifiers e and w(...).

The corresponding cell is treated as if it has **z**ero width for the purpose of determining the width of its column.

cf. Example 1.

#### Number

A number given as a column modifier is interpreted as a en length which is used as a column separation. This is the distance that separates the end of the current cell's content from the beginning of the next cell's content. If there is a vertical line between the two cells, then it will appear centered on this separation distance.

The default column separation is controlled by the sum of the left and right keys of the pad option. When not specified, this defaults to 0.75em + 0.75em, which traditional TROFF calls 3n.

cf. Example 13, 14.

# 4. Data

Each input line following the terminating . of the format specifications creates a new row of data in the table, with each cell separated by the tab string.

# 4.1. Special input lines

Some input lines do not represent table rows at all:

• A line consisting of only (underscore) draws a horizontal line at that position in the table. This is only useful if auto-lines is false.

```
cf. Example 3, 4, 5, 14.
```

Similarly, (equals sign) in TROFF would draw a double horizontal line, but this is not currently supported.

- A line consisting of only .TH (period + capital T + capital H) is an end-of-header marker. All rows of data that precede it are considered part of the table's header for the purposes of the header-rows option. It also sets repeat-header to true. This is only useful if breakable is also true and the table spans multiple pages.
- A line consisting of only .T& (period + capital T + ampersand) in TROFF marks the beginning of a new set of format specifications to be terminated by . and more table data to follow, but this is not currently supported.
- Lines that begin with \(\)\" (period + backslash + double quote) are treated as comments and completely ignored.
- Other lines that begin with . (period) in TROFF were used as *commands* (requests or macro invocations), but this cannot be supported for obvious reasons. Any such line is rejected. To have the first cell in a row begin with a period, use a Typst escape like \(\cdot\). or put a SPACE in front of it.

# 4.2. Table entries

The string representing the cell content is called the *table entry*. For the most part, this is simply passed to the Typst eval function, so you can use Typst markup within a table entry. There are a few important caveats:

- The **eval** function does not have access to anything other than the Typst standard library. This means it is not currently possible to reference variables or functions within a table entry.
- Numerically-aligned cells are split on the alignment point and then evaluated as two separate pieces of content. This may cause unexpected syntax errors if you have Typst markup that spans the alignment point.
- The tab string cannot be used within a table entry, except by using Typst hexadecimal escape sequences (provided that tab is not any of  $\setminus$ , u,  $\{,\}$ , a letter, or a digit).
- Any occurrences of the string \& (backslash-ampersand; known as the non-printing input token) in the table entry are removed.

# 4.3. Special table entries

If certain characters are alone in a table entry, they gain a special meaning:

- (a single underscore): Draw a horizontal line through the middle of this otherwise empty cell. The line touches any adjacent vertical lines that are present.
  - cf. Example 5, 8, 13.
- \( \) (backslash + underscore): Like \( \) above, but the line does **not** touch any adjacent vertical lines, subject to the current column separation.
  - cf. Example 13.
- = (equals sign): Like above, but draw a double horizontal line.
  - cf. Example 13.
- \= (backslash + equals sign): Like = above, but subject to column separation like \\_ above.
- \( \) (backslash + caret): This cell is row-spanned by the corresponding cell in the previous row above. This is similar to the \( \) column classifier, but can be used at an arbitrary point in the table.
  - cf. Example 4.

# 4.4. Text blocks

A table entry can also span multiple input lines by writing it as a  $text\ block$ . This consists of beginning the entry with  $T\{$  (capital T + open brace), followed immediately by the end of that input line. All following input lines are collected as part of the text block until a input line that begins with  $T\}$  (capital T + close brace) is encountered. The rest of that input line can provide the remaining entries for that row of the table.

If the cell is subject to the w(...) column modifier, then the text block is constrained to the specified width.

Otherwise, a constraining width W is calculated according to the following formula:

$$W = L \times \frac{C}{N-1}$$

where L is the maximum width of the table based on the container it is in, or the width of the page minus the margins if there is no container; C is the number of columns this text block spans horizontally; and N is the total number of columns in the table.

cf. Example 12, 13.

# 5. Differences from traditional tbl

• Region options must be specified using a "show-everything" rule; they cannot be provided within the raw block itself.

- The tab option may be a multi-character string.
- The linesize option is expected to be a Typst color, length, or stroke; a dimensionless number does not work.
- The alignment point of numerically-centered cells that are in the same column as left-centered or right-centered cells is always centered with respect to the column as a whole (as if the classifier was C), rather than with respect to the widest L or R entry.
- All column modifiers that expect an argument must provide that argument in parentheses.
- The o(...) column modifier is a tbl.typ extension.
- Nothing special needs to be done to use equations within table entries, though numerically-aligned columns may behave unexpectedly until the delim option is implemented.
- An empty entry in the table data must be given even if the cell is spanned or contains a horizontal line.
- \Rx table entries are not handled. Use the Typst repeat element function instead, though this does not work well at the moment without a fully-functioning w(...) column modifier (see Known issues).

# 6. Known issues

- The following region options are not currently supported:
  - delim (GH#1)
  - expand (GH#2)
  - nospaces
  - nowarn
- The pad region option currently requires the left and right keys to be explicitly provided. Unexpected behavior may occur if x is provided as a key. (GH#3)
- The following column classifiers are not currently supported:
  - A (alphabetic)
  - [] (double vertical line)
- You may need to apply the e column modifier to one or more of the rightmost columns in order to minimize their width. This appears to be a more fundamental issue with Typst or tablex at the moment.
- The w(...) (minimum width) column modifier currently only sets the width of text blocks; it does not yet affect other table cells. (GH#5)
- The x (expand) column modifier does not currently constrain the width of text blocks like it should.
- .T& in the table data is not currently supported. (GH#4)
- Within text blocks, .\" comments are not removed, and other TROFF commands are not rejected. (GH#6)
- A table data row consisting of only = (double horizontal line) is not currently supported.

# 7. Examples

The following examples are formatted with these region options:

```
#show: tbl.template.with(box: true, tab: "|")
```

#### Example 1: adapted from [4]

## Example 2: adapted from [5, p. 41]

```
```tbl
ссс
   Fact
  Location
   Statistic
ll ne .
   Largest state
   Alaska
   591,004 sq. mi.
Fact|Location|Statistic
   Rhode Island
Largest state|Alaska|591,004 sq. mi.
   Smallest state
   1,212 sq. mi.
Smallest state|Rhode Island|1,212 sq. mi.
   Longest river
   Mississippi-Missouri
   3,710 mi.
Longest river|Mississippi-Missouri|3,710 mi.
   Highest mountain
   Mount McKinley, AK
  20,320 ft.
Highest mountain|Mount McKinley, AK|20,320 ft.
   Lowest point
   Death Valley, CA
   - 282 ft.
Lowest point|Death Valley, CA|-- 282 ft.
```

## Example 3: adapted from [4]

```
```tbl
r| l
r n.
                                                                               software
                                                                                         version
software|version
                                                                                  AFL
                                                                                              2.39b
                                                                                 Mutt
                                                                                            1.8.0
AFL|2.39b
                                                                                 Ruby
                                                                                           1.8.7.374
Mutt|1.8.0
                                                                              TeX Live
                                                                                           2015
Ruby | 1.8.7.374
TeX Live | 2015
```

#### Example 4: adapted from [5, p. 43]

```
cf(Courier New) s s s
c | cs s
c | cs s
c |c|c|c
c |c|c|c
                                                                             Composition of Foods
l |n |ne |ne.
                                                                                       Percent by Weight
Composition of Foods
                                                                        Food
                                                                                                     Carbo-
                                                                                             Fat
                                                                                  Protein
                                                                                                     hydrate
Food|Percent by Weight
                                                                     Apples
                                                                                      .4
                                                                                               .5
                                                                                                       13.0
                                                                     Halibut
                                                                                    18.4
                                                                                              5.2
\^|Protein|Fat|Carbo-
                                                                     Lima beans
                                                                                     7.5
                                                                                              .8
                                                                                                       22.0
\^|\^|\^|hydrate
                                                                     Milk
                                                                                                        5.0
                                                                                     3.3
                                                                                              4.0
                                                                     Mushrooms
                                                                                     3.5
                                                                                              .4
                                                                                                        6.0
Apples | .4 | .5 | 13.0
                                                                     Rve bread
                                                                                     9.0
                                                                                               .6
                                                                                                       52.7
Halibut|18.4|5.2|...
Lima beans | 7.5 | .8 | 22.0
Milk|3.3|4.0|5.0
Mushrooms | 3.5 | .4 | 6.0
Rye bread | 9.0 | .6 | 52.7
```

### Example 5: adapted from [5, p. 42]

```
```tbl
c s s
c | c | c
l | l | ne .
Major New York Bridges
  Major New York Bridges
Bridge|Designer|Length
   Bridge
  Designer
   Length
   Brooklyn
  J. A. Roebling
   1595
Brooklyn|J . A . Roebling|1595
   Manhattan
  G . Lindenthal
  1470
Manhattan|G . Lindenthal|1470
  L . L . Buck
   Williamsburg
  1600
Williamsburg | L . L . Buck | 1600
  Palmer &
  1182
   Queensborough
  Hornbostel
Queensborough|Palmer &|1182
  1380
|Hornbostel
  O. H. Ammann
   Triborough
   383
||1380
   Bronx Whitestone
  O . H . Ammann
  2300
Triborough | 0 . H . Ammann | _
   Throgs Neck
  O . H . Ammann
   1800
||383
   George Washington
  O . H . Ammann
  3500
Bronx Whitestone | 0 . H . Ammann | 2300
Throgs Neck|0 . H . Ammann|1800
George Washington|0 . H . Ammann|3500
```

The following examples are formatted with these region options:

```
#show: tbl.template.with(tab: "|")
```

#### Example 6: adapted from [4]

```
'``tbl
rb c lb
r ci l.
r center l
r|center|l
ri|ce|le
right|c|left
'``

r center l
ri ce le
right c left
```

### Example 7: adapted from [3]

## Example 8: adapted from [5, p. 42]

```
```tbl
СС
np(-2) | n | .
|Stack
                                                                                           Stack
1|46
                                                                                            46
                                                                                            23
2 | 23
                                                                                            15
3 | 15
                                                                                             6.5
|_
4|6.5
                                                                                             2.1
|_
5|2.1
Í
```

#### **Example 9:** adapted from [5, p. 37]

```tbl	
n. 13	13
4.2 26.4.12	4.2 26.4.12
26.4. 12	26.4. 12 26.4 .12
26.4 .12 abc	abc
abc\& 43\&3.22	abc 433.22
749.12	749.12

#### The following examples are formatted with these region options:

```
#show: tbl.template.with(allbox: true, tab: "|")
```

Dividend

\$1.20

1.20

1.20

1.20

1.20

.30\*

## Example 10: adapted from [5, p. 41]

```
```tbl
c s s
ссс
                                                                           AT&T Common Stock
n n ne .
                                                                        Year
                                                                                 {\rm Price}
AT&T Common Stock
                                                                        1984
                                                                                  15-20
Year|Price|Dividend
                                                                                  19-25
                                                                           5
1984|15-20|\$1.20
                                                                           6
                                                                                  21-28
5|19-25|1.20
                                                                           7
                                                                                  20-36
6|21-28|1.20
                                                                           8
                                                                                  24 - 30
7|20-36|1.20
                                                                           9
                                                                                  29-37
8|24-30|1.20
9|29-37|.30\*
```

# Example 11

```tbl	
cbo(luma(85%))	
co(luma(95%)) c.	Grade Points
Grade Points	$A \geq 510$
A \$ >= 510\$	B ≥ 450
B \$ >= 450\$	C ≥ 390
C \$ >= 390\$	D ≥ 330
D \$ >= 330\$	

#### Example 12: adapted from [5, p. 44]

```
```tbl
cf(I) s s
c cw(lin) cw(lin)
ltp(9) ltp(9) ltp(9).
New York Area Rocks
Era|Formation|Age (years)
Precambrian|Reading Prong|>1 billion
Paleozoic|Manhattan Prong|400 million
Mesozoic|T{
#set text(hyphenate: true, overhang: true)
Newark Basin, incl.
Stockton, Lockatong, and Brunswick
formations; also Watchungs
and Palisades.
T}|200 million
Cenozoic|Coastal Plain|T{
#set text(hyphenate: true, overhang: true)
#set par(justify: true)
On Long Island 30,000 years;
Cretaceous sediments redeposited
by recent glaciation.
T}
```

New York Area Rocks			
Era	Formation	Age (years)	
Precambrian	Reading Prong	>1 billion	
Paleozoic	Manhattan Prong	400 million	
Mesozoic	Newark Basin,	200 million	
	incl. Stockton,		
	Lockatong, and		
	Brunswick forma-		
	tions; also		
	Watchungs and		
	Palisades.		
Cenozoic	Coastal Plain	On Long Island	
		30,000 years; Cre-	
		taceous sediments	
		redeposited by re-	
		cent glaciation.	

## Example 13: adapted from [4]

```
le le7 lw(10).
The fourth line|_|line 1
of this column|=|line 2
determines|\_|line 3
the column width.|T{
This text is too wide to fit into a column of width 17.
T}|line 4
T{
No break here.
T}||line 5
...
```

The fourth line		line 1
of this column		line 2
determines		line 3
the column width.	This text is too wide to fit into a column of width 17.	line 4
No break here.		line 5

## The following examples are formatted with these region options:

```
#show: tbl.template.with(doublebox: true, tab: " : ")
```

#### Example 14: adapted from [5, p. 45]

Readability of Text				
	Line Wid	th and Leading for	10-Point Type	
Line	Set	1-Point	2-Point	4-Point
Width	Solid	Leading	Leading	Leading
9 Pica	93	-6.0	-5.3	-7.1
14 Pica	450	-0.6	-0.3	-1.7
19 Pica	5	-5.1	0.0	-2.0
31 Pica	3	-3.8	-2.4	-3.6
43 Pica	5.1	-90000.000	-5.9	-8.8

# 8. References

- [1] https://typst.app/
- [2] Pg Biel, "Typst-tablex." https://github.com/PgBiel/typst-tablex
- [3] https://man7.org/linux/man-pages/man1/tbl.1.html
- [4] https://man.openbsd.org/tbl.7
- [5] L. L. Cherry, and M. E. Lesk, "Tbl a program to format tables," in *Unix Res. System*, A. G. Hume, and M. D. McIlroy, Eds., vol. 2, 10th ed., Murray Hill, New Jersey 07974: Holt Rinehart & Winston, pp. 35–51. [Online]. Available: https://9p.io/10thEdMan/tbl.pdf