

# lavaanExtra: Convenience Functions for Package *lavaan*

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## Summary

`{lavaanExtra}` is an R package that offers an alternative, vector-based syntax to package `{lavaan}`, as well as other convenience functions such as naming paths and defining indirect links automatically. It also offers convenience formatting optimized for a publication and script sharing workflow.

## Statement of need

`{lavaan}` ([Rosseel, 2012](#)) is a very popular R package for structural equation modeling (SEM). `{lavaan}` requires familiarizing oneself with a specific syntax to define latent variables, regressions, covariances, indirect effects, and so on.

`{lavaanExtra}` does mainly two things. First, it offers an alternative, code-efficient syntax. Second, it facilitates the analysis-to-publication workflow by providing publication-ready tables and figures (following the style of the American Psychological Association, APA).

## Alternative Syntax

There is a single function at the center of the proposed alternative syntax, `write_lavaan()`. The idea behind `write_lavaan()` is to define individual components (regressions, covariances, latent variables, etc.), provide them to the function, and have it write the `lavaan` model, so the user does not have to worry about making typos in the specific symbols required for each aspect of the model.

There are several benefits to this approach. Some `lavaan` models can become very large. By defining the entire model every time, such as is typical with `{lavaan}` users, not only do we break the DRY (Don't Repeat Yourself) principle, but our scripts can also become long and unwieldy. This problem gets worse in the scenario where we want to compare several variations of the same general model. `write_lavaan()` allows the user to reuse code components, say, only the latent variables, for future models.

This aspect also allows better control over the user's code. If the user makes a mistake in one of say five SEM models definition, the user will have to change it at all five places within the script. With `write_lavaan()`, the user only needs to change it once, at the relevant location, and it will update future occurrences automatically since it relies on reusable components.

The vector-based approach also allows the use of functions to define components. For example, if all scale items are named consistently, say `x1` to `x50`, one can use `paste0("x", 1:50)` instead of typing all the items by hand and risk making mistakes.

Another issue with `lavaan` models is readability of the code defining the model. One can go in lengths to make it pretty, but not everyone does, and the model formatting is certainly not

38 standardized. With `write_lavaan()`, not only is the model standardized, but it is also neatly  
39 divided in clear and useful categories.

40 Finally, for beginners, it can be difficult to remember the correct lavaan symbols for each  
41 specific operation. `write_lavaan()` uses intuitive names to convert the information to the  
42 correct symbols, meaning the user does not have to rely on memory as much. Even for people  
43 familiar with lavaan syntax, this approach can save time. The function also saves time by  
44 offering the possibility to define the named paths automatically, with clear and intuitive names.

45 I provide a simple Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) example below, where the latent variables  
46 visual, textual, and speed are defined by items 1 to 9. We can then use the `cat()` function  
47 on the resulting object (of type character) to read it in the traditional way and make sure we  
48 have not made any mistake.

```
library(lavaanExtra)

latent <- list(visual = paste0("x", 1:3),
              textual = paste0("x", 4:6),
              speed = paste0("x", 7:9))

model.cfa <- write_lavaan(latent = latent)
cat(model.cfa)

49 ## #####
50 ## # [-----Latent variables (measurement model)-----]
51 ##
52 ## visual =~ x1 + x2 + x3
53 ## textual =~ x4 + x5 + x6
54 ## speed =~ x7 + x8 + x9

55 Should we want to use these latent variables in a full SEM model, we do not need to define
56 the latent variables again, only the new components. With the lavaanExtra syntax, when
57 defining our lists of components, we can think of the = sign as "predicted by", a bit like ~ for
58 regression. There is an exception to this for the indirect object, which also allows specifying
59 our variables directly instead. When such is the case, write_lvaan() will define all indirect
60 paths automatically.

DV <- c("speed", "textual")
M <- "visual"
IV <- c("ageyr", "grade")

mediation <- list(speed = M, textual = M, visual = IV)
regression <- list(speed = IV, textual = IV)
covariance <- list(speed = "textual", ageyr = "grade")
indirect <- list(IV = IV, M = M, DV = DV)

model.sem <- write_lavaan(mediation, regression, covariance,
                          indirect, latent, label = TRUE)
cat(model.sem)

61 ## #####
62 ## # [-----Latent variables (measurement model)-----]
63 ##
64 ## visual =~ x1 + x2 + x3
65 ## textual =~ x4 + x5 + x6
66 ## speed =~ x7 + x8 + x9
67 ##
68 ## #####
```

```

69 ## # [-----Mediations (named paths)-----]
70 ##
71 ## speed ~ visual_speed*visual
72 ## textual ~ visual_textual*visual
73 ## visual ~ ageyr_visual*ageyr + grade_visual*grade
74 ##
75 ## #####
76 ## # [-----Regressions (Direct effects)-----]
77 ##
78 ## speed ~ ageyr + grade
79 ## textual ~ ageyr + grade
80 ##
81 ## #####
82 ## # [-----Covariances-----]
83 ##
84 ## speed ~~ textual
85 ## ageyr ~~ grade
86 ##
87 ## #####
88 ## # [-----Mediations (indirect effects)-----]
89 ##
90 ## ageyr_visual_speed := ageyr_visual * visual_speed
91 ## ageyr_visual_textual := ageyr_visual * visual_textual
92 ## grade_visual_speed := grade_visual * visual_speed
93 ## grade_visual_textual := grade_visual * visual_textual

```

## 94 Tables

95 The most popular {lavaanExtra} function for tables is `nice_fit()`, which extracts only some of  
96 the most popular fit indices and organize them such that it is easy to compare models. There  
97 is an option to format the table as an APA {flextable} (Gohel & Skintzos, 2023), through  
98 the {rempsyc} package (Thériault, 2022), using option `nice_table = TRUE`. This flextable  
99 object can then be easily exported to Microsoft Word. Below we fit our two earlier models and  
100 feed them to `nice_fit()` as a named list:

```

library(lavaan)
fit.cfa <- cfa(model.cfa, data = HolzingerSwineford1939)
fit.sem <- sem(model.sem, data = HolzingerSwineford1939)

fit_table <- nice_fit(dplyr::lst(fit.cfa, fit.sem), nice_table = TRUE)
fit_table

```

Model	$\chi^2$	df	$\chi^2/df$	p	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR	AIC	BIC
fit.cfa	85.31	24	3.55	< .001***	.93	.90	.09	.06	7,517.49	7,595.34
fit.sem	116.26	36	3.23	< .001***	.93	.89	.09	.06	8,638.13	8,749.25
Ideal Value <sup>a</sup>	—	—	< 2 or 3	> .05	≥ .95	≥ .95	< .06-.08	≤ .08	Smaller is better	Smaller is better

<sup>a</sup>As proposed by Schreiber et al. (2006).

102 The table can then be saved to word simply using `flextable::save_as_docx()` on the resulting  
103 flextable object.

```
flextable::save_as_docx(fit_table, path = "fit_table.docx")
```

104 It is similarly possible to prepare APA tables in Word with the regression coefficients  
105 (`lavaan_reg()`), covariances (`lavaan_cov()`), or indirect effects (`lavaan_ind()`). For  
106 example, for indirect effects:

```
lavaan_ind(fit.sem, nice_table = TRUE)
```

Indirect Effect	Paths	<i>p</i>	$\beta$	95% CI
ageyr → visual → speed	ageyr_visual*visual_speed	.016*	-0.08	[-0.15, -0.02]
ageyr → visual → textual	ageyr_visual*visual_textual	.013*	-0.08	[-0.14, -0.02]
grade → visual → speed	grade_visual*visual_speed	.001**	0.13	[0.05, 0.21]
grade → visual → textual	grade_visual*visual_textual	.001***	0.13	[0.05, 0.20]

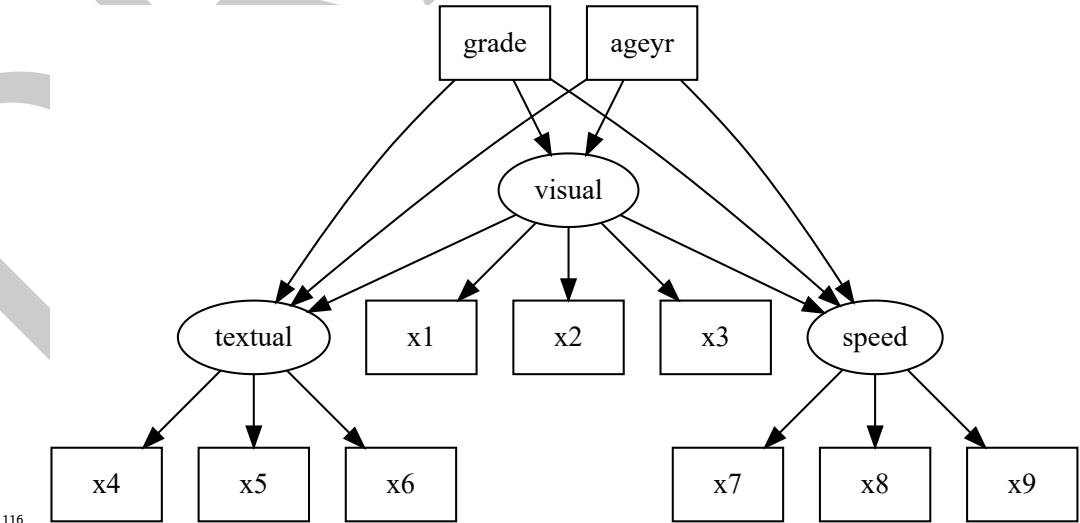
107

108 **Figures**

109 There are several packages designed to plot SEM models, but few that people consider  
110 satisfying or sufficiently good for publication. There are two packages that stand out however,  
111 {lavaanPlot} (Lishinski, 2021) and {tidySEM} (van Lissa, 2023b). Yet, even for those excellent  
112 packages, most people do not view them as publication-ready or at least optimized in the best  
113 possible way.

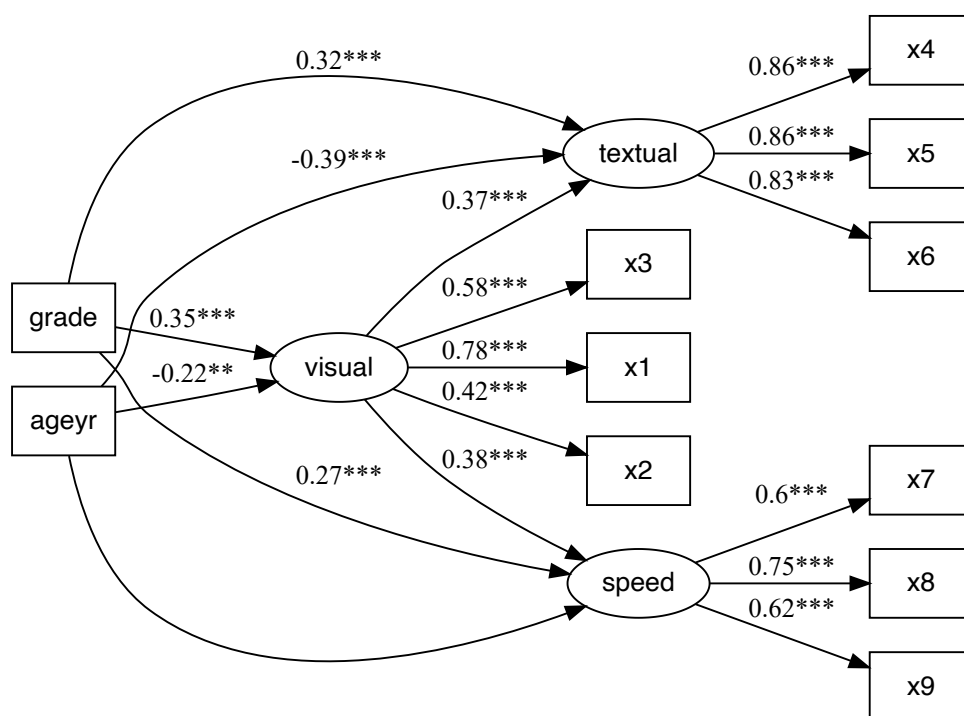
114 This is what nice\_lavaanPlot and nice\_tidySEM aim to correct. Let's compare the default  
115 lavaanPlot() and nice\_lavaanPlot() outputs side-by-side for demonstration purposes.

```
lavaanPlot::lavaanPlot(fit.sem)
```



116

```
nice_lavaanPlot(fit.sem)
```



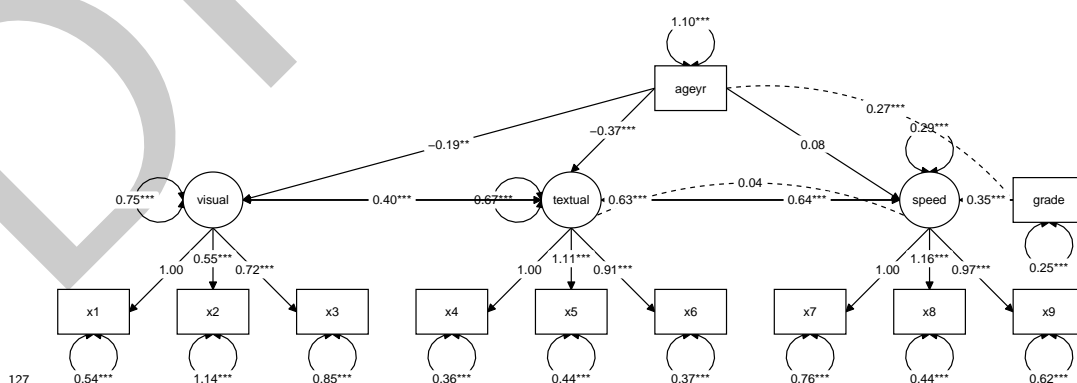
117

118 As these figures demonstrate, `nice_lavaanPlot()` has several elements frequently requested  
119 by researchers (especially in psychology): (a) an horizontal, rather than vertical, layout; (b)  
120 the coefficients appear per default (but only significant ones); (c) significance stars; and (d)  
121 the use of a sans serif font (as required by APA style for figures).

122 Even so, `nice_lavaanPlot` is not perfectly optimal for publication, for example for the use  
123 of curved lines, which many researchers dislike. Nonetheless, it will still yield excellent and  
124 satisfying results for a quick and easy check.

125 In turn, the best option for publication is `nice_tidySEM`. Let's first look at the default output  
126 of the base `tidySEM::graph_sem()` for reference.

`tidySEM::graph_sem(fit.sem)`



127

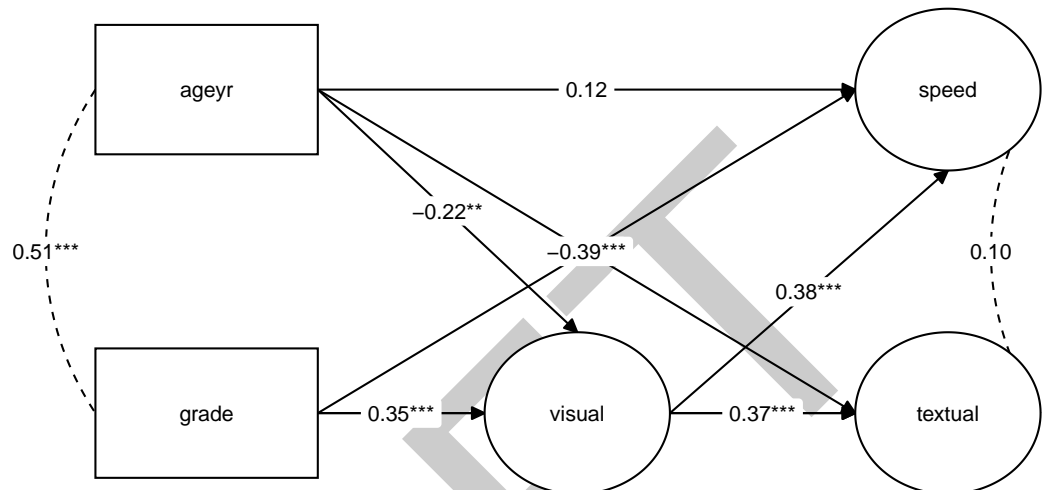
128 The author of the `{tidySEM}` package notes that

129 This uses a default layout, provided by the `igraph` package. However, the node  
130 placement is not very aesthetically pleasing. One of the areas where `tidySEM`  
131 really excels is customization. (van Lissa, 2023a)

132 In this sense, most of the time, both `tidySEM` and `nice_tidySEM` will need a layout in order to  
133 yield the best result. One of the benefits of `nice_tidySEM` is that when our model is simply

made of three “levels”: independent variables, mediators, and dependent variables (e.g., for a path analysis, or if we do not want to draw the items for a full SEM), it is possible to automatically specify a proper layout by simply feeding it the indirect object that we created earlier.

```
nice_tidySEM(fit.sem, layout = indirect)
```



138

For the time being, nice\_tidySEM only supports this three-level automatic layout, but designs with more levels are in the works. In the meantime, when the model is more complex (or that we want to include items), it is necessary to specify the layout manually using a matrix or data frame, which allows a fine-grained control over the generated figure.

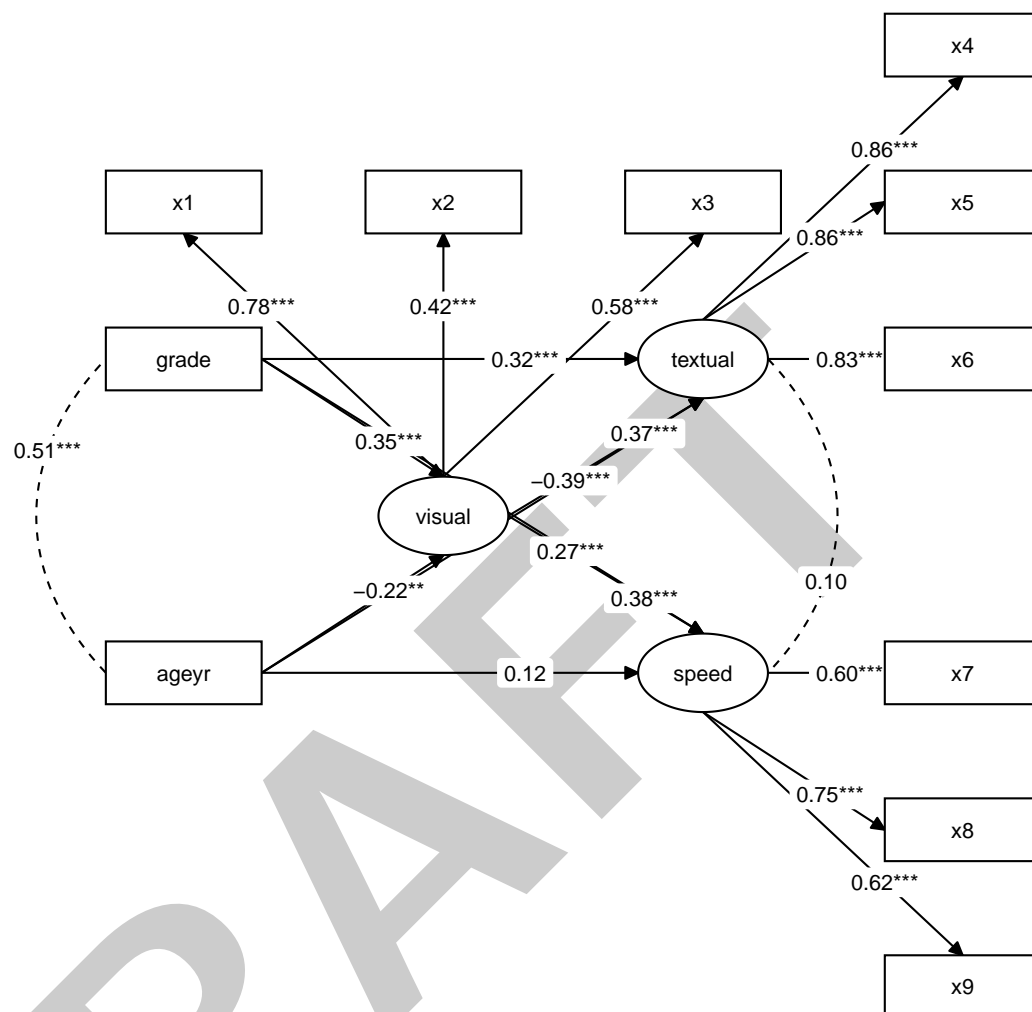
```
mylayout <- data.frame(
  IV = c("", "x1", "grade", "", "ageyr", "", ""),
  M = c("", "x2", "", "visual", "", "", ""),
  DV = c("", "x3", "textual", "", "speed", "", ""),
  DV.items = c(paste0("x", 4:6), "", paste0("x", 7:9)))
as.matrix(mylayout)
```

```

143 ##      IV      M      DV      DV.items
144 ## [1,] ""      ""      ""      "x4"
145 ## [2,] "x1"    "x2"    "x3"    "x5"
146 ## [3,] "grade" ""      "textual" "x6"
147 ## [4,] ""      "visual" ""      ""
148 ## [5,] "ageyr" ""      "speed"  "x7"
149 ## [6,] ""      ""      ""      "x8"
150 ## [7,] ""      ""      ""      "x9"

```

```
nice_tidySEM(fit.sem, layout = mylayout, label_location = 0.70)
```



151

152 The resulting figure can be saved using `ggplot2::ggsave()`.

```
ggplot2::ggsave("my_semPlot.pdf", width = 7, height = 4)
```

153 Other differences between `{tidySEM}` and `nice_tidySEM()` are that the latter displays stan-  
154 dardized coefficients by default, does not plot the variances per default, and allows defining an  
155 automatic layout in specific cases (as described earlier).

156 Finally, the base function, `tidySEM::graph_sem()`, is difficult to customize in depth.  
157 For the aesthetics of `nice_tidySEM()`, for example, we need to rely instead on the  
158 `tidySEM::prepare_graph()` and `tidySEM::edit_graph()` functions. In contrast to  
159 `nice_tidySEM()`, these `tidySEM` functions act more like a grammar of SEM plotting, akin  
160 to the popular grammar of graphics, `{ggplot2}` (Wickham, 2016). This provides great  
161 flexibility, but for the occasional user, this comes with an additional burden, as users need to  
162 skim through almost 400 different functions simply to understand how to edit the resulting  
163 `sem_graph` object.

## 164 Availability

165 The `{lavaanExtra}` package is licensed under the MIT License. It is available on CRAN, and  
166 can be installed using `install.packages("lavaanExtra")`. The full tutorial website can be  
167 accessed at: <https://lavaanExtra.remi-theriault.com/>. All code is open-source and hosted on  
168 GitHub, and bugs can be reported at <https://github.com/rempsyc/lavaanExtra/issues/>.

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