

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. In the example below, the dependent
57 variables DV (speed and textual) are mediated by the mediator M (visual) and predicted by
58 the independent variables IV (ageyr and grade). Similarly, we specify covariances between the
59 DVs and IVs, and in this case our indirect effects can be determined 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)

60 ## #####
61 ## # [-----Latent variables (measurement model)-----]
62 ##
63 ## visual =~ x1 + x2 + x3
64 ## textual =~ x4 + x5 + x6
65 ## speed =~ x7 + x8 + x9
66 ##
67 ## #####
68 ## # [-----Mediations (named paths)-----]
```

```

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

```

Tables

The most popular {lavaanExtra} function for tables is `nice_fit()`, which extracts only some of the most popular fit indices and organize them such that it is easy to compare models. There is an option to format the table as an APA {flextable} (Gohel & Skintzos, 2023), through the {rempsyc} package (Thériault, 2022), using option `nice_table = TRUE`. This flextable object can then be easily exported to Microsoft Word. Below we fit our two earlier models and 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	χ^2	df	χ^2/df	p	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR	AIC	BIC
fit.cfa	85.31	24	3.55	< .001***	0.93	0.90	0.09	0.06	7,517.49	7,595.34
fit.sem	116.26	36	3.23	< .001***	0.93	0.89	0.09	0.06	8,638.13	8,749.25
Ideal Value^a	—	—	< 2 or 3	> .05	≥ .95	≥ .95	< .06-.08	≤ .08	Smaller is better	Smaller is better

^aAs proposed by Schreiber et al. (2006).

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

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

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

```
x <- lavaan_ind(fit.sem, nice_table = TRUE)
flextable::save_as_docx(x, path = "ind_table.docx")
lavaan_ind(fit.sem, nice_table = TRUE)
```

Indirect Effect	Paths	β	p
ageyr \rightarrow visual \rightarrow speed	ageyr_visual*visual_speed	-0.08	.020
ageyr \rightarrow visual \rightarrow textual	ageyr_visual*visual_textual	-0.08	.015
grade \rightarrow visual \rightarrow speed	grade_visual*visual_speed	0.13	.002
grade \rightarrow visual \rightarrow textual	grade_visual*visual_textual	0.13	.001

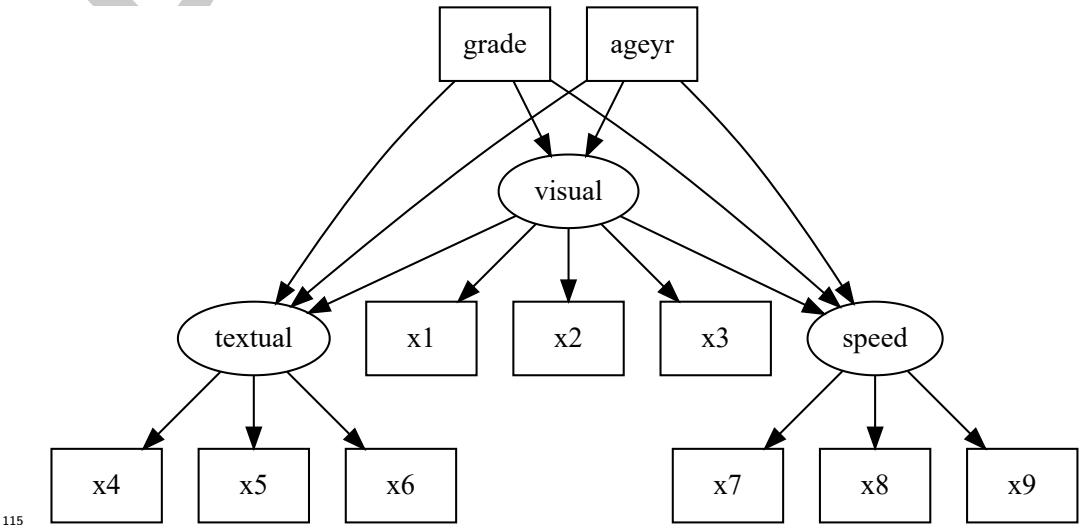
106

107 Figures

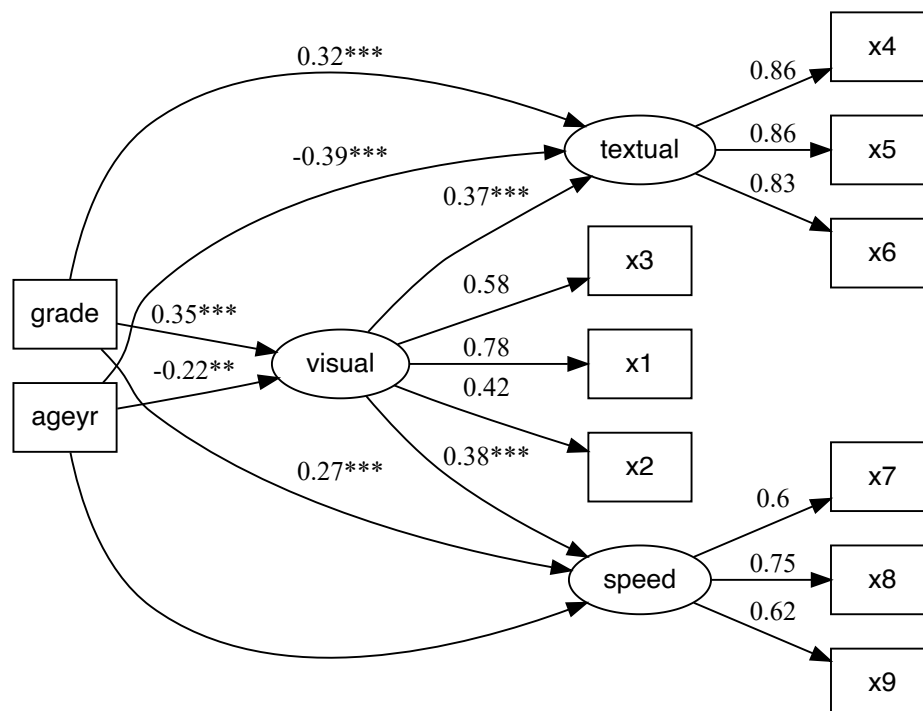
108 There are several packages designed to plot SEM models, but few that people consider
109 satisfying or sufficiently good for publication. There are two packages that stand out, however,
110 `{lavaanPlot}` (Lishinski, 2021) and `{tidySEM}` (van Lissa, 2023b). Yet, even for those excellent
111 packages,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

113 This is what `nice_lavaanPlot` and `nice_tidySEM` aim to correct. Let's compare the default
114 `lavaanPlot()` and `nice_lavaanPlot()` outputs side-by-side for demonstration purposes.

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



```
nice lavaanPlot(fit.sem)
```



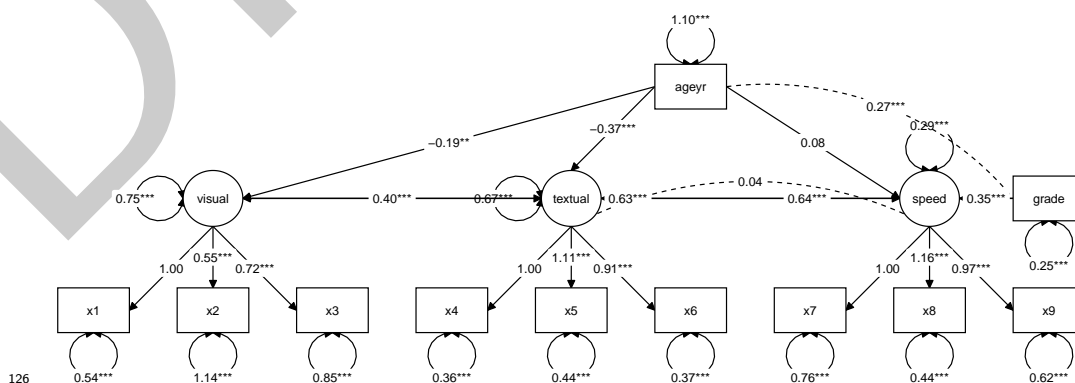
116

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

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

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

```
tidySEM::graph sem(fit.sem)
```



126

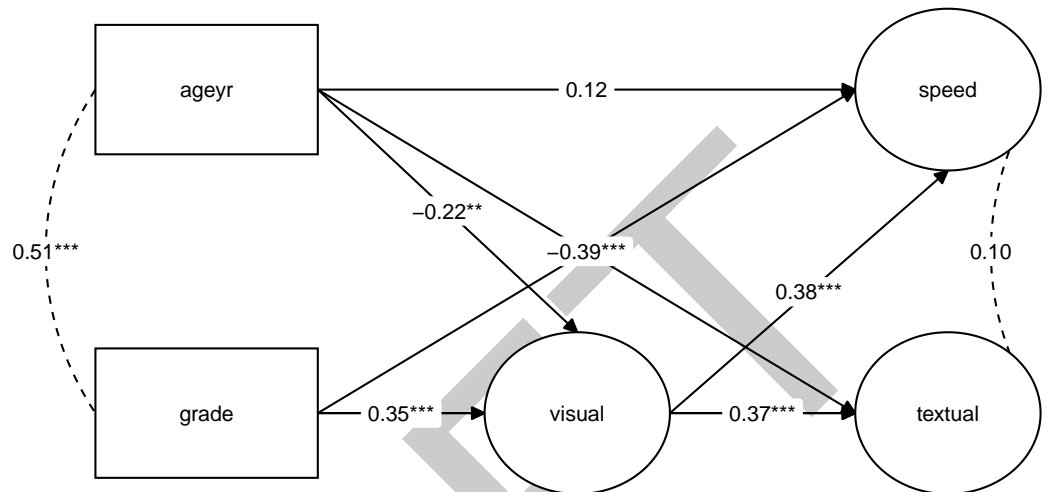
127 The author of the `{tidySEM}` package notes that

the [default] node placement is not very aesthetically pleasing. [However] one of the areas where tidySEM really excels is customization. (van Lissa, 2023a)

In this sense, most of the time, both `tidySEM` and `nice_tidySEM` will need a layout in order to 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)
```



136

For the time being, nice_tidySEM only supports this three-level automatic layout, but more designs 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.

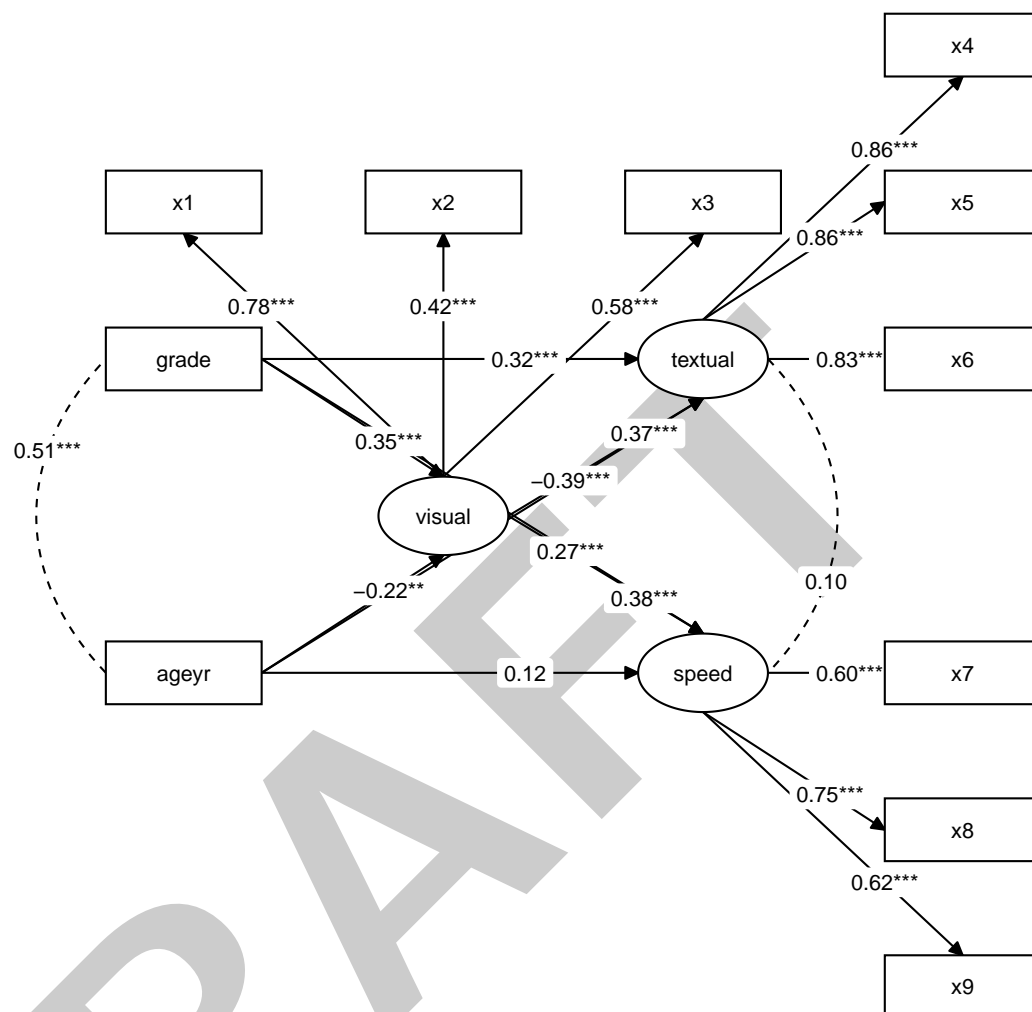
```
mylayout <- data.frame(
  IV = c("", "x1", "grade", "", "ageyr", "", ""),
  M = c("", "x2", "", "visual", "", "", ""),
  DV = c("", "x3", "textual", "", "speed", "", ""),
  DV.items = c(paste0("x", 4:6), "", paste0("x", 7:9)))
as.matrix(mylayout)
```

```

141 ##      IV      M      DV      DV.items
142 ## [1,] ""      ""      ""      "x4"
143 ## [2,] "x1"    "x2"    "x3"    "x5"
144 ## [3,] "grade" ""      "textual" "x6"
145 ## [4,] ""      "visual" ""      ""
146 ## [5,] "ageyr" ""      "speed"  "x7"
147 ## [6,] ""      ""      ""      "x8"
148 ## [7,] ""      ""      ""      "x9"

```

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



149

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

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

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

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

162 Availability

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

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