

Good practice R coding

Day 1 - Introduction to Data Analysis with R

Selina Baldauf

Freie Universität Berlin - Theoretical Ecology

March 10, 2025

Chaotic projects and workflows ...

... can make even small changes frustrating and difficult.



Artwork by [Allison Horst](#), CC BY 4.0

Background

Often, we want to **share** and **publish** our projects.

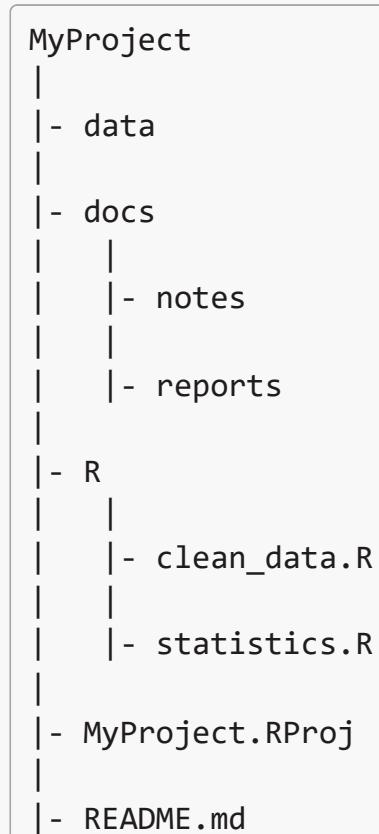
- **Reproducibility** 
 - Can someone else reproduce my results?
- **Reliability** 
 - Will my code work in the future?
- **Reusability** 
 - Can someone else actually use my code?

Set up your project properly

Consistent structure and filenames

Have a clear project structure

- One directory with all files relevant for project
 - Scripts, data, plots, documents, ...
- Choose a meaningful project structure¹
- Add a readme file (usually `README.md`) in which you document the project structure



Example RStudio project structure

1. you can orient yourself at the [R package structure](#)

Use RStudio projects

Always make your project an RStudio Project (if possible)!

-  You already did that.

Set up your project

R Studio offers a lot of settings and options.

So have a  and check out **Tools -> Global Options** and all the other buttons.

- [R Studio cheat sheet](#) that explains all the buttons
- Update R Studio from time to time to get new settings ([Help -> Check for Updates](#))

Name your files properly

Your collaborators and your future self will love you for this.

Principles ¹

File names should be

1. Machine readable
2. Human readable
3. Working with default file ordering

1. From [this talk](#) by J. Bryan

1. Machine readable file names

Names should allow for easy **searching**, grouping and extracting information from file names.

- No space & special characters

Bad examples ✗

- 📄 2023-04-20 temperature göttingen.csv
- 📄 2023-04-20 rainfall göttingen.csv

Good examples ✓

- 📄 2023-04-20_temperature_goettingen.csv
- 📄 2023-04-20_rainfall_goettingen.csv

2. Human readable file names

Which file names would you like to read at 4 a.m. in the morning?

- File names should reveal the file content
- Use separators to make it readable

Bad examples 

-  01preparedata.R
-  01firstscript.R

Good examples 

-  01_prepare-data.R
-  01_temperature-trend-analysis.R

3. Default ordering

If you order your files by name, the ordering should make sense:

- (Almost) always put something numeric first
 - Left-padded numbers (`01`, `02`, ...)
 - Dates in `YYYY-MM-DD` format

Chronological order

-  `2023-04-20_temperature_goettingen.csv`
-  `2023-04-21_temperature_goettingen.csv`

Logical order

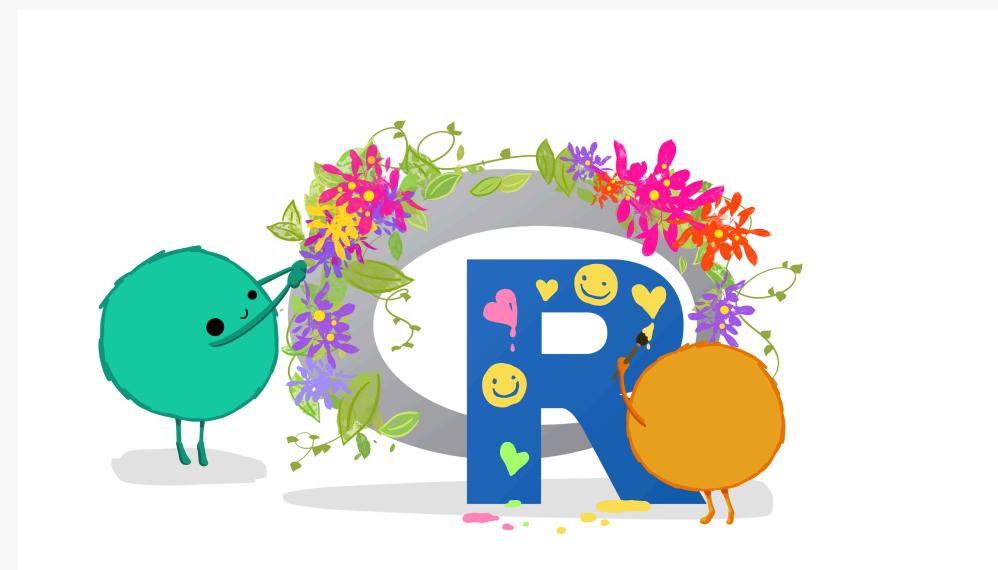
-  `01_prepare-data.R`
-  `02_lm-temperature-trend.R`

Let's start coding

Good practice R coding

Write beautiful code

- Try to write code that others (i.e. future you) can understand
 - Follow standards for readable and maintainable code
 - For R: [tidyverse style guide](#) defines code organization, syntax standards,
- ...



Artwork by [Allison Horst](#), CC BY 4.0

Standard code structure

1. General comment with purpose of the script, author, ...
2. `library()` calls on top
3. Set default variables and global options
4. Source additional code
5. Write the actual code, starting with loading all data files

```
# This code replicates figure 2 from the
# Baldauf et al. 2022 Journal of Ecology
# paper.
# Authors: Selina Baldauf and Jane Doe
# Copyright Selina Baldauf (2024)

library(tidyverse)
library(vegan)

# set defaults
input_file <- "data/results.csv"

# source files
source("R/my_cool_function.R")

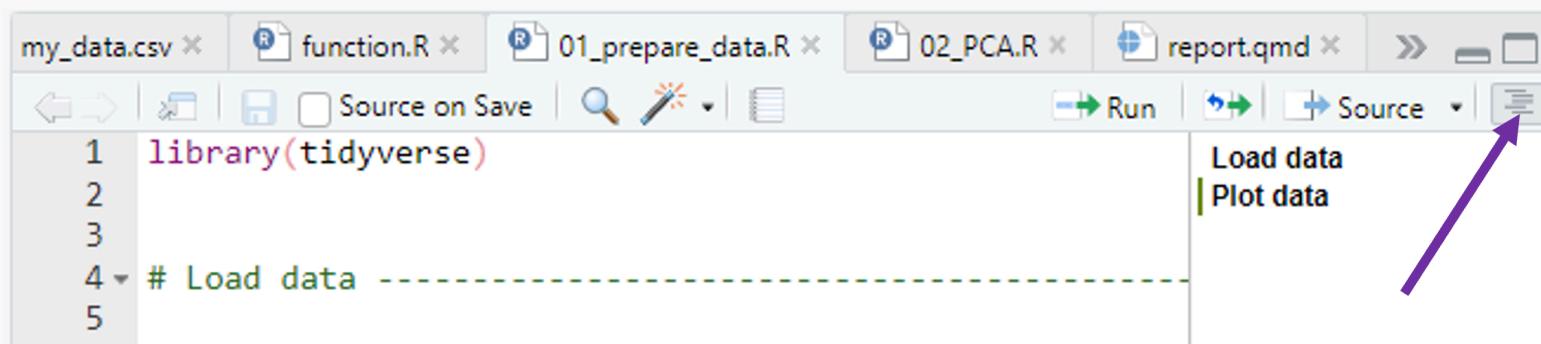
# read input
input_data <- read_csv(input_file)
```

Mark sections

- Use comments to break up your file into sections

```
# Load data -----  
  
input_data <- read_csv(input_file)  
  
# Plot data -----  
  
ggplot(input_data, aes(x = x, y = y)) +  
  geom_point()
```

- Insert a section label with **Ctrl/Cmd + Shift + R**
- Navigate sections in the file outline



Break down large scripts

- If your scripts become too big, split them
- You can use `source()` in R to load the content of another script
 - You can source the same script into multiple other scripts

`R/analyse_species.R:`

```
# This code ....  
# Authors: Selina Baldauf and Jane Doe  
# Copyright Selina Baldauf (2024)  
  
library(tidyverse)  
library(vegan)  
  
# source file for data reading and cleaning  
# reads in the species data and cleans it for  
# further analysis  
# output is the tibble species_clean  
source("R/prepare_data/read_and_clean_data.R")  
  
# Analyse species data -----  
  
# code for the analysis
```

`R/prepare_data/read_and_clean_data.R`

```
# Script to read in the raw species data and clean it  
  
path_to_species <- "data/species.csv"  
  
species_raw <- read_csv(path_to_species)  
  
# further code for cleaning the data
```

Coding style - Object names

- Variables should only have *lowercase letters, numbers, and *_**
- Use **snake_case** for longer variable names
- Try to use concise but meaningful names

```
# Good
day_one
day_1

# Bad
DayOne
dayone
first_day_of_the_month
dm1
```

Coding style - Spacing

- Always put spaces after a comma

```
# Good  
x[, 1]
```

```
# Bad  
x[ , 1]  
x[ ,1]  
x[ ,1]
```

Coding style - Spacing

- Always put spaces after a comma
- No spaces around parentheses for normal function calls

```
# Good
mean(x, na.rm = TRUE)

# Bad
mean (x, na.rm = TRUE)
mean ( x, na.rm = TRUE )
```

Coding style - Spacing

- Always put spaces after a comma
- No spaces around parentheses for normal function calls
- Spaces around most operators (`<-`, `==`, `+`, etc.)

```
# Good
height <- (feet * 12) + inches
mean(x, na.rm = TRUE)
```

```
# Bad
height<-feet*12+inches
mean(x, na.rm=TRUE)
```

Coding style - Spacing

- Always put spaces after a comma
- No spaces around parentheses for normal function calls
- Spaces around most operators (<-, ==, +, etc.)
- Spaces before pipe (|>) followed by new line

```
# Good
iris |>
  summarize_if(is.numeric, mean, .by = Species) |>
  arrange(desc(Sepal.Length))

# Bad
iris|>summarize_if(is.numeric, mean, .by = Species)|>arrange(desc(Sepal.Length))
```

Coding style - Spacing

- Always put spaces after a comma
- No spaces around parentheses for normal function calls
- Spaces around most operators (`<-`, `==`, `+`, etc.)
- Spaces before pipe (`|>`) followed by new line
- Spaces before `+` in ggplot followed by new line

```
# Good
ggplot(aes(x = Sepal.Width, y = Sepal.Length, color = Species)) +
  geom_point()

# Bad
ggplot(aes(x = Sepal.Width, y = Sepal.Length, color = Species))+geom_point()
```

Coding style - Line width

Try to limit your line width to 80 characters.

- You don't want to scroll to the right to read all code
- 80 characters can be displayed on most displays and programs
- Split your code into multiple lines if it is too long
 - See this grey vertical line in R Studio?

```
# Bad
iris |> summarise(Sepal.Length = mean(Sepal.Length), Sepal.Width = mean(Sepal.Width), Species = n_distinct(Species))

# Good
iris |>
  summarise(
    Sepal.Length = mean(Sepal.Length),
    Sepal.Width = mean(Sepal.Width),
    Species = n_distinct(Species),
    .by = Species
  )
```

Coding style

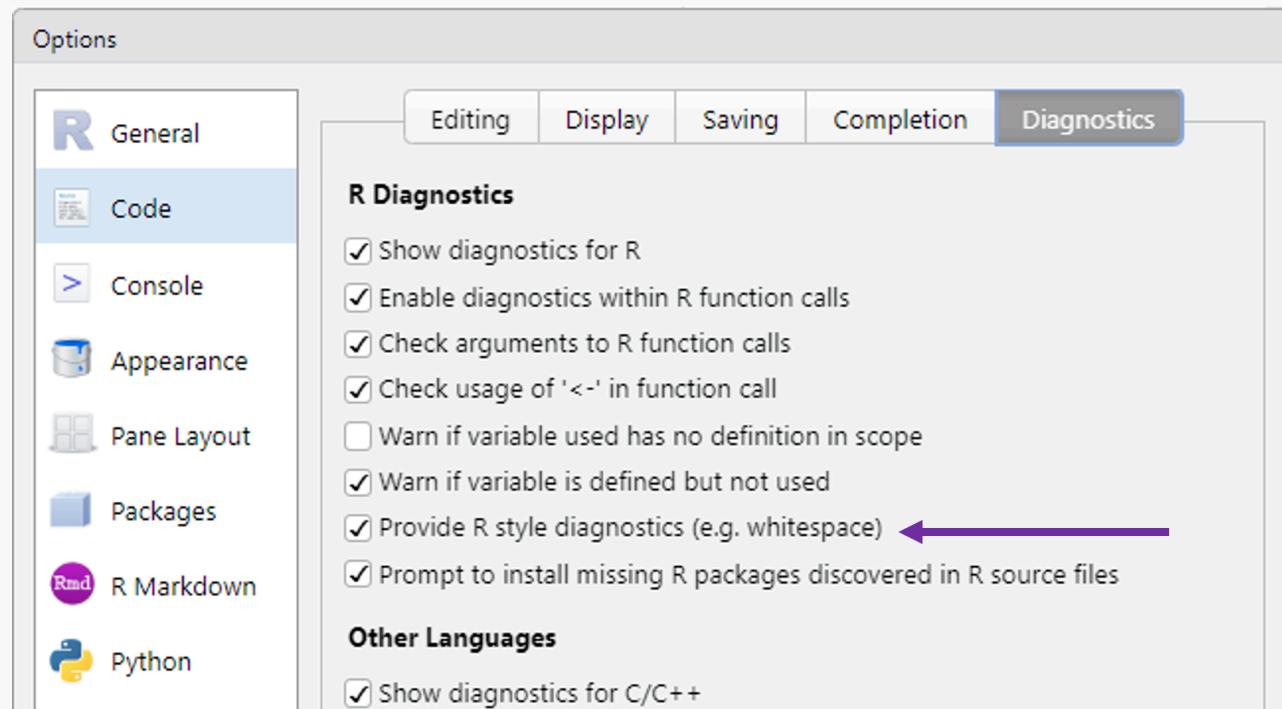
Do I really have to remember all of this?

Luckily, no! R and R Studio provide some nice helpers

Coding style helpers - RStudio

RStudio has style diagnostics that tell you where something is wrong

Tools -> Global Options -> Code -> Diagnostics



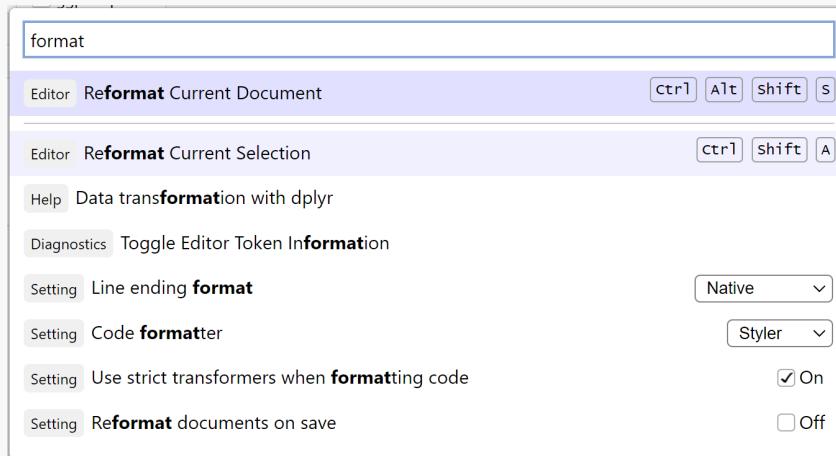
The screenshot shows a code editor window with R code. Lines 11 through 15 are shown:

```
10
11 data<-data %>%
12   group_by( group ) %>%
13   summarize(
14     measure=mean(measure,na.rm=TRUE)
15   )
```

A callout box highlights line 14 with the message: "expected whitespace around '=' operator".

Coding style helpers - Auto-formatting

RStudio can automatically format your code!



- Open the command palette with **Ctrl/Cmd + Shift + P**
- Search for “format” to see all formatting options
 - “Reformat Current Document” to format the open script
 - You can toggle “Reformat documents on save” to format automatically on save
 - By default the “Code formatter” is the tidyverse style guide (Styler)

Coding style helpers - Linting

- Linters are tools that analyze your code for potential errors
- The R package `lintr` is a linter for R code
 - Install it with `install.packages("lintr")`
- Open the command palette with `Ctrl/Cmd + Shift + P` and search for “lint”
 - “Lint current file” to lint the open script
 - This will print a list of potential improvements in the console area



Let's share

Publish or share your analysis

Make your code sharable

- Use relative paths!
- Make sure you include all necessary files
- Include a readme with instructions on how to run the code and an explanation of the project structure
- Comment your code to make it understandable



Send your code to a colleague

If you are unsure if your code is understandable and can run on another machine, send it to a colleague and ask them to run it and give you feedback

Publishing your code

- Include a licence
 - Choose a licence (common for open source projects: MIT, GPL-3.0)
 - Use the `usethis` package to add a licence to your project
 - `install.packages("usethis")`
 - `usethis::use_mit_license("Your Name")` adds a licence file to your project
- Show which packages and which versions you used
 - this is important for reproducibility as packages change over time
 - `devtools::session_info()` prints a list of all packages and their versions (add this to your readme file)
 - `renv` is a package that helps you manage package versions
- Consider learning Git and publish on GitHub/Gitlab etc.

Clean projects and workflows ...

... allow you and others to work productively.

But don't get overwhelmed by all the advice. Just start with one thing.



Artwork by [Allison Horst](#), CC BY 4.0

Selina Baldauf // Good practice R coding