

Writing numbers

Overview

Whether you are writing a piece of fiction, a travel itinerary, a shopping list or a business plan, it is likely you will need to consider how to express quantities, distance, time, weight, percentages, dates, etc. How you express numbers is partly guided by the field you are writing for/working in. You should also consider your intended audience. Above all, ensure you apply your chosen style consistently within your document.

Who writes the rules about numbers?

There are many conventions about how to write numbers. If you do an internet search for advice on writing numbers, you will find a plethora of information. In the end, it is up to you (and your publishing house) to decide what works for you. You can include this information in a 'Style Sheet' to share with your editor and publisher.

Some common conventions

Text vs Arabic numerals: One, two, three ...ten, 11, 12, 13

OR one, two, three, ...one hundred, 101, 102, 103.

Match digits and symbols: *50% of the soldiers were French* OR *fifty per cent of the soldiers were French.* (Ref 1)

Length: Write out numbers that are one or two words long: *I have two hundred budgies*; but use numerals for words of more than three words: *My friend has ~~one hundred and seventy~~ 170 pairs of shoes.* BUT avoid mixing words and numbers. If it looks inconsistent, treat number-words in the same way in a sentence. (Ref 3)

I ate 15 cherries on Tuesday but only five today □

I ate fifteen cherries on Tuesday but only five today ▯

OR *I ate 15 cherries on Tuesday but only 5 today* ▯

Use numerals **where accompanied by a symbol**, eg for money (\$30), measures (16 kms), percentages (59%), dates (22 March 2018) and time (5 o'clock, 5.00 pm, 1700 hours). (Ref 1 and 2)

To allow for international differences where a comma is a decimal point, separate **groups of numbers** with a space, not a comma (eg AUS 1,506 is EUR 1.506 SO write 1 506). (Ref 1)

Punctuating numbers: use hyphens for *twenty-one to ninety-nine*. If writing a number as a plurals, avoid using apostrophes, eg *ones, twos, fours, sixes, twenties*. (Ref 3)

Express **fractions** as $\frac{1}{4}$ rather than 1/4.

Percentages can be written in various ways: 15%, 15 per cent, fifteen per cent. (Ref 1)

Dates *May 10, 2018, 10th May 2018, 10 May 2018* As numerals: *UK 10/05/2018, US 05/10/2018, Ger 2018/05/10, ISO 2018 05 10.* Currency: *A\$10, NZ\$20, £500, €200, ¥15 000.* (Ref 1)

If **starting a sentence with a number**, use words: *50 soldiers marched down the street* should be *Fifty soldiers marched down the street* OR *They counted 50 soldiers marching down the street.* (Ref 1)

Take-home messages

At some stage as a writer, you will need to write numbers.

Consistency within your written piece is important.

Consider your target audience (local, children, international, technical)

Decide on your preferred approach and record it in a Style Sheet.

References

1. Australian Government bodies (and many Australian editors and printers) use the *Style manual for authors, editors and printers*, often referred to as 'Snooks'.
2. Pam Peters, *The Cambridge Guide to Australian English*.
3. *The Essentials of English* by Ann Hogue (US)