

Ten Rules for Writing Numbers and Units of Measure

Rules for writing numbers and units of measurement vary according to the disciplines involved, e.g. the social sciences, the biological sciences. The following rules are mainly taken from the APA (American Psychological Association) style book and other sources detailing commonly used rules for expressing numbers in the sciences.

1. Numbers beginning a sentence must be spelled out. (You can avoid having to do so by changing the order of words in a sentence so that the number is not in the initial position).

Example: Six children experienced side effects from the new drug.

Hyphenate cardinal numbers from 21 to 99 when it is necessary to express them in words, e.g.

Example: Twenty-nine of the patients recovered within a week.

2. Spell out numbers one through nine; 10 and above, use numerals.

Example: The operation lasted five hours.

The operation lasted 22 hours.

The first operation was successful, but the 13th was not.

BUT: Use digits for numbers that are grouped for comparison with numbers > 10

Example: In 5 of the 22 responses, patients claimed they experienced depression.

Example: The 3rd and 5th operations were unsuccessful.

AND: Use numerals to express rounded large numbers.

Example: Of the 3 million patients who took the drug, 125 expired.

3. Use commas as follows: 2,461 21,278 1,409,000 (can be expressed as 1.4 million)

4. Use numerals to write numbers immediately before a unit of measure, time, dates, and points on a scale (even if they are lower than 10) AND abbreviate *most* units

Example: 6 cm, 6 days, 7 years (days, months, and years are not abbreviated)

Use the following abbreviations for units of measurement. Do not add an “s” for plurals. Include a space between numbers and units: for example, 75 kg, but no space with percentages, e.g. 75%.

meter	m	liter	L (capital “L”)
cubic centimeters	cc	milliliter	ml
kilogram	kg	degree	°C

5. Use digits for math functions, e.g. 3%, a ratio of 16:1
6. Spell out common fractions. However, fractions are generally written as decimals or sometimes ratios (particularly for incidences of a disease)

Example: One fifth of the patients were treated with aspirin.
Aspirin was used to treat 20% of the patients.
The incidence of breast cancer in women is 1:9.

7. Use figures to indicate age.

Example: The patient is 18 months old.
The 18-month-old patient is recovering rapidly.
Men in their 70s are particularly susceptible to the disease.

8. Insert 0 before a decimal point when the value is less than one, e.g. 0.37
9. When specifying a range of numbers, give the numbers in full when they are below 100. Otherwise, give at least the last two digits, e.g. 2-3 10-12 96-99 103-04 923-29
However, if the numbers refer to years, use as many numbers as needed to make the time clear, e.g. 1765-1821
10. Decades are written in numerals without an apostrophe: 1970s.

Sources:

1. A Guide To Numbers, Illustrations And Measurements In Scientific Writing
<http://www.latrobe.edu.au/learning/assets/downloads/numbers.doc>
2. Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, Fourth Edition, pp. 99-111
3. Rules for the Use of Numbers in Scientific Writing, <http://cnx.org/content/m16064/latest/>