

Handling Numbers in Written Communication

Excerpted from Markel, Mike, [*Technical Communication*](#), 6th ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001.)

The following guidelines are generally observed for choosing between using words and numerals:

- 1. Technical quantities of any amount are expressed in numerals, especially if a unit of measurement is included:**

3 feet	12 grams
43,219 square miles	36 hectares

- 2. Nontechnical quantities of fewer than 10 are expressed in words:**

three persons	six whales
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- 3. Nontechnical quantities of 10 or more are expressed in numerals:**

300 persons	12 whales	35 percent increase
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- 4. Approximations are written out:**

approximately ten thousand people
about two million trees

- 5. Round numbers over nine million are expressed in both words and numerals:**

14 million light-years	\$64 billion
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- 6. Decimals are expressed as numerals:**

3.14	1,013.065
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- 7. Fractions are written out, unless they are linked to technical units:**

two-thirds of the members	3 ½ hp
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- 8. Time of day is expressed in numerals if A.M. or P.M. is used; otherwise, it is written out:**

6:10 A.M.	six o'clock	the nine-thirty train
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9. Page numbers and titles of figures and tables are expressed in numerals:

Figure 1

Table 13

page 261

10. Back-to-back numbers are written using both words and numerals:

six 3-inch screws fourteen 12-foot ladders
3,012 five-piece starter units

In general, the technical unit should be expressed with the numeral. If the nontechnical quantity would be cumbersome for words, use the numeral for it instead.

11. Numbers in legal contracts or in documents intended for international readers should be represented in both words and numerals:

thirty-seven thousand dollars (\$37,000)
five (5) relays

12. Street addresses may require both words and numerals:

3801 Fifteenth Street

Special Cases

- **A number at the beginning of a sentence should be spelled out:**

Thirty-seven acres was the size of the lot.

Many writers would revise the sentence to avoid this problem:

The lot was 37 acres.

- **Within a sentence, the same unit of measurement should be expressed consistently in either numerals or words:**

INCORRECT On Tuesday the attendance was 13; on Wednesday, eight.

CORRECT On Tuesday the attendance was 13; on Wednesday, 8.

CORRECT On Tuesday the attendance was thirteen; on Wednesday, eight.