# Knowhow

**ciep** Chartered Institute of Editing and Proofreading

## Editing and proofreading numbers

**When editing or proofreading, you'll usually come across numbers in some form or other. Depending on the type of writing, they may be crucial to the information being conveyed, or may have little more than an incidental role.**

The way that numbers are used in text is subject to various style choices. As with many other aspects of writing, it's important to enforce a consistent style that's suited to the material you're working on – bearing in mind its purpose and audience – and is in line with any preferences your client has set out.

As part of an editing or proofreading job, you should take the time to make sure the treatment of numbers is identified and recorded in detail. This will help you to ensure consistency, and may help other people who are involved in the project – such as the project manager, the typesetter and (if you're copyediting) the proofreader – to be clear about the conventions being followed.

### Style decisions to consider

- Words or numerals?
- Thousand separators
- Millions and above
- Fractions
- Units of measure
- Ages
- Currency figures
- Percentages
- Dates
- Centuries and decades
- Times of day
- Numbers of chapters, sections, figures, etc
- Number ranges

## Terms used in this fact sheet

| Term | Description |
|------|-------------|
| axis | One of the two straight lines that frame a graph, usually labelled with sequences of numbers. The x-axis is the horizontal line at the bottom of the graph, while the y-axis is the vertical one to the left. |
| cardinal numbers | The type of numbers that usually represent amounts (but can also be used in codes or reference numbers), as distinct from ordinal numbers. |
| decimal places | The numerals that appear after the full point (or other separator) in a decimal fraction, for example the final two numerals in '7.43'. |
| ISO | The International Organization for Standardization, a body that sets international standards in a variety of fields. |
| numerals | The characters from '0' (zero) to '9', also known as digits or sometimes figures. |
| numeric | Using numerals rather than words. |
| ordinal numbers | Numbers that represent positions in a sequence or ranking, such as 'fourth' and '16th'. |
| percentage points | A term that is often used to prevent confusion over changes in percentages. For example, if something has gone up from 20% to 30%, it would be misleading to call this a 10% increase – that would imply that it had risen by one tenth, which would make it only 22%. Instead, we can say it has gone up by 10 percentage points. |
| units of measure | Terms that are used, along with numbers, for measuring things such as distance, weight and time, such as 'miles', 'kilograms' and 'minutes'. |

## Style decisions in detail

The most common and basic decision to be made is between words and numerals: 'three' or '3'; 'fifty-one' or '51'? This isn't always as straightforward as it may initially seem, though, and you may need to face many other choices. Let's look at the most common of these choices and how they can be addressed.

### Words or numerals?

For precise, positive whole numbers, the usual convention is to use words up to a certain limit and numerals beyond that. The limit is normally nine, ten, twenty, ninety-nine or one hundred. If words are used for two-part numbers such as twenty-one and sixty-eight, they're commonly hyphenated, but may be spaced. However, numbers such as four hundred, if written in words, are almost always spaced.

Words may well be preferred for *approximate* numbers of all sizes, for example 'about two hundred people were there'. Also, most clients don't like to see numerals at the start of a sentence. There are often other exceptions to the general rule, as we'll see below.

These guidelines may apply to ordinal numbers ('fifth', '16th', 'forty-second') in the same way that they apply to cardinal ones, or there may be different requirements for these.

### Thousand separators

In numbers with four or more figures (at least until we reach the millions – see below), a separator is often used to arrange the digits into groups – for example, '7,345' or '18,292' – making the numbers easier to digest. This doesn't apply to numbers that are used primarily for reference or identification purposes, such as years, page numbers and reference or code numbers ('ISO 27001', for example).

The separator is most commonly a comma, but may be a full point in some cases; or, in a scientific context, it may be a thin or non-breaking space.

Some clients don't use a separator for four-figure numbers; so they could have '42,450' but also '5832'. Alternatively, especially in business and financial documents, the 'k' notation may be used to denote 'thousands', for example '5.4k' rather than '5,400'.

### Millions and above

When we get to this order of magnitude, precise numbers often aren't needed, and are difficult to read. So, rather than writing all seven or more digits, it's common to use a simpler format: '5m', '5 million', 'five million', '4.6bn', '17 trillion' (remember, though, that 'm' could be taken to mean 'metres' in some contexts). As you can see, there are various choices to be made here.

### Fractions

There are three common styles: simple, common or vulgar fractions ('½', '2⅝'); decimal fractions ('0.5', '2.625' – possibly using a comma rather than a full point in non-English-speaking territories); and words ('one half', 'two and five-eighths'). When words are used, they may be either spaced or hyphenated, though the latter is unlikely in cases such as 'a half' and 'one quarter'.

### Units of measure

Measurements may be written in full or as abbreviations. If full words are used, the quantities sometimes follow the general style for numbers: for example, if words are used for numbers up to ten only, we could have 'six miles' and '15 ounces'. However, especially in factual writing, numerals are often preferred for all measurements.

## Useful software

Software tools and tricks can be a big help in assessing what you'll need to do with numbers in a given document, and in making the necessary edits.

- Try using **Word's Find** function (with wildcards where needed) to look for things like numbers in the millions, centuries and number ranges.
- Paul Beverley's **Word macros** are worth investigating, particularly the FRedit find-and-replace macro, which can find and highlight text that matches various patterns. FRedit uses Word's native wildcard functionality, but it lets you store your regularly used search strings in scripts, and run these whenever you need to without having to recreate them, potentially using a series of search strings at the same time.
- **PerfectIt** (a Word add-in available from Intelligent Editing) can check for the consistency of some number-related style points such as words vs numerals, thousand separators and percentages.

If the units are abbreviated, it's very likely that numerals will be preferred for the amounts, as words would look odd ('seven km', for example). The abbreviated unit may need to be closed up to the number, or separated from it by a space, typically a thin or non-breaking one (7km or 7 km).

The style guidelines for measurement may include measures of time, or these may be treated differently. This can be a grey area: does 'five days' represent a length of time, in which case it should be treated as a measurement, or a number of discrete (and not necessarily consecutive) days, which would mean it should follow the general style for numbers? You may sometimes need to analyse the context carefully.

### Ages

People's ages are often written as numerals no matter how low the numbers may be, for example 'at the age of 5', 'a 9-year-old girl', '32 years of age'. A decade-long range of ages could be written in numeric form ('in her 20s'), but the spelled-out form may well be preferred ('in her twenties').

### Currency figures

In most contexts, the usual symbol for the currency should be written immediately before the amount, which should be numeric (except for the possible use of 'k', 'm', 'million' and so on), for example '£120', '€26.50', '$12 million'. For dollar amounts, the '$' symbol could be preceded by a clarification such as 'US' or 'NZ' if this seems helpful, otherwise it would create needless clutter.

Some clients may want the **ISO currency code** to be used instead of the symbol, perhaps followed by a space before the numeric figure: 'GBP 120', 'EUR 26.50', 'USD 12 million'.

### Percentages

These may be written using either the '%' symbol (almost always closed up to a numeric figure, for example '4%'), 'per cent' or 'percent'. If 'per cent' or 'percent' is used, the figure could be written as either numerals or words according to the preferred style ('4 per cent', 'four percent').

## Things to look out for

As you do your detailed editing or proofreading, it's worth keeping an eye out for various errors and oddities, such as the following:

- **Facts:** You may find numbers that you suspect may be factually wrong. Although fact-checking may not be part of your remit, you will be helping your client if you query things that seem questionable.
- **Calculations:** It's helpful to check calculations, such as a total at the bottom of a column in a table. If there are a lot of these, you could just offer to do some random spot-checking, and to verify any other calculations that seem suspect. Remember that percentages don't have to add up to exactly 100 (though they should at least come close), as there could be a rounding error.
- **Proximity:** If two or more numbers are close together and closely related, but some are written as words and others as numbers, this can look odd, for example 'the groups had between eight and 15 people'. The client may want to avoid this, most likely preferring numerals to be used.
- **Percentages:** If the text refers to something rising or falling by a certain percentage, check whether the author really means percentage points.
- **Minus:** A negative numeric figure should, strictly speaking, be preceded by the mathematical minus symbol rather than a hyphen or an en or em rule. In Word, you can insert this character using the Symbol function; its Unicode character code is 8722 (2212 in hex notation). In less formal texts, though, the client might not be concerned about this.
- **Degrees:** For temperatures or angles expressed in numerals, the author may have used the word 'degrees' when the degree symbol (°) is actually required, simply because they didn't know how to type the symbol. This is also accessible via Word's Symbol function, as Unicode character 176 (00B0 in hex).

## Dates

In sentences, a common format is '1 May 2021' in British English, or 'May 1, 2021' in US styles. An ordinal number could be used for the day ('1st May 2021', 'May 1st, 2021', with the ending either superscripted or not). The year can be omitted if it's obvious or irrelevant.

In things like tables and graphs, an all-numeric format is usually preferred, typically 'dd/mm/yyyy' in British English or 'mm/dd/yyyy' in US format. Because of this variation, all-numeric dates can easily cause confusion for readers in different countries. Full points or hyphens are sometimes used instead of a slash, especially in continental Europe. For the day and month, leading zeroes may be included ('01/05/2021') to give the dates a more uniform appearance, or left out ('1/5/2021'). The year may be shortened to just the final two digits. The 'yyyy-mm-dd' format is sometimes used – this is good for avoiding ambiguity, but not so good for readability.
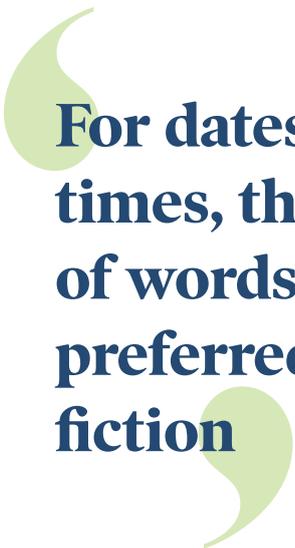
> **For dates and times, the use of words is often preferred in fiction**

In fiction, words are generally more suitable: 'it was the first of May'. This is especially true in dialogue, as this style closely represents what the character is saying.

## Centuries and decades

The ordinal number of a century may be written in word or numeric form. This could follow the general preference for writing numbers – so the client may want 'ninth century' but also '17th century' – or, for a more consistent look, they may prefer a uniform style for all centuries. The word 'century' could be capitalised, but this may well be seen as excessive.

Decades can be referred to in various ways, according to the context and preference: '1960s', ''60s' (perhaps starting with an apostrophe to indicate omission of the first two digits), 'nineteen-sixties', 'sixties'. In any case, there shouldn't be an apostrophe before the 's'.

## Times of day

In many forms of writing, times are usually written numerically, with a colon or full point between the hour and minute figures.

If the 12-hour clock is used, the hour usually doesn't have a leading zero ('3:30 am' rather than '03:30 am'), and the minute figure is often left out for top-of-the-hour times ('7 am'). There's a choice of formats for the am/pm signifier: it may be closed up to the numerals, or separated by a normal or non-breaking space; it may or may not have full points; and capitals or small capitals may be preferred, though this is quite rare. Beware of potential confusion over '12 am' and '12 pm' – it's usually clearer to use '12 midnight' or '12 noon'.

With the 24-hour clock, a leading zero may be preferred for the hours from 0 to 9 ('04:20'), especially in tables and figures, and the minute figure is always included.

As with dates, the use of words is often preferred in fiction: 'three o'clock', 'nine in the morning', 'quarter to seven'.

## Numbers of chapters, sections, figures etc

References (including cross-references) to elements of a text typically use numerals: 'see Chapter 7', 'in Section 4.2', 'see Figure 2.6'. However, words may be preferred in some cases, especially for chapters, whose headings may use that style.

## Number ranges

For a range of numbers that are written as numerals, an en rule is usually considered the correct form of punctuation rather than a hyphen, for example 'the 20–24 age group'.

The second number may or may not be *elided* (that is, one or more numerals may be omitted at the start), especially in a range of pages or years. With maximum elision, all non-essential numerals are left out, for example '282–283' would be shortened to '282–3'; with minimum elision, this would be '282–83'. Usually, numbers whose last two digits are in the 10–19 range are not elided, as this could be misleading and difficult to read.

## Context is key

The client's style preferences, and the most sensible choices, will depend largely on the type of writing you're dealing with. Generally, the more factual, technical or scientific the material is, the stronger the preference for numerals and abbreviated units of measure.

Numerals, especially single ones, are conspicuous in normal text – they 'jump off the page', potentially having a jarring effect for the reader. In fiction and literary non-fiction works, numbers tend to play a minor role, and maintaining the visual smoothness of the text takes precedence over drawing attention to them.

By contrast, in fact-oriented material, the reader may well need to focus strongly on the numbers, especially when making comparisons, or looking for patterns, trends and so on. In this context, numerals are more helpful than words.

The use of numbers can also vary between the main text and other types of content, such as graphs, tables and lists. These usually place a bigger emphasis on numbers, and the readers will often be looking to analyse them in relation to each other. So, numerals tend to be predominant here. For example, if a table column consists of numbers, they almost certainly should all be numeric, however small they may be. To save space and reduce clutter, units of measure are likely to be abbreviated (unless the full words are short), and are often used in a column heading or axis label so that they aren't needed next to each number. Also in a table column, numbers usually all have the same number of decimal places (or none) and are aligned to the right, to make comparison easier.

## Getting started

Before you start editing or proofreading in earnest, try to find out which style decisions need to be made in relation to numbers. For example, does the text mention any numbers in the millions or above, or any measurements or percentages? If so, is it consistent? The 'Useful software' box on page 2 has some pointers for this. You're unlikely to catch everything at this stage, but the more issues you can identify, the better prepared you'll be.

Next, you need to establish how you should deal with these elements of the text when you come across them. Your client may have a style guide that covers at least some of these points, or may have included them in the brief. If you're proofreading for a publisher, the copyeditor may have produced a style sheet that will help you here.
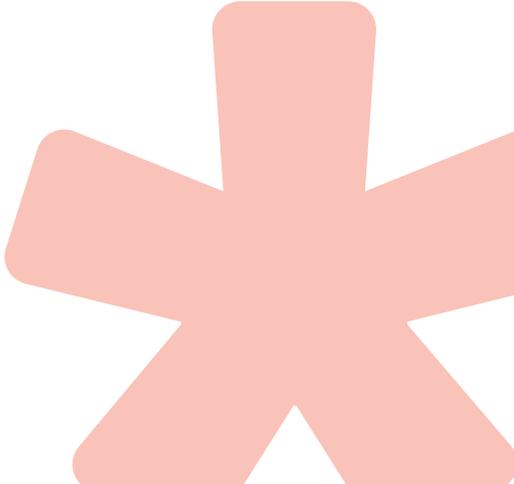
> **The use of numbers can vary between the main text and other types of content**

If you're unsure about any of the client's preferences, ask. They may leave it for you to decide (this happens often if there's no style guide), in which case you should think carefully about which choices would work best for the target readers, considering the type and purpose of the material. Record these decisions in a style sheet, at least for your own reference. If you're using PerfectIt on a Windows PC, you can adjust some of the relevant style settings according to the client's preferences and/or your decisions. Now you're ready to go …

## In your style sheet

Here's an example of how you might record your findings and decisions in part of a style sheet, under a heading such as 'Numbers and dates' (or, if you're proofreading, how a copyeditor might have already done this).

### Style sheet example

- Words for one to ten (except with units of measure); numerals for 11 and above.
- Comma separators for four figures and above: 1,452; 64,250.
- Dates: 15 May 2021.
- Centuries: 19th century.
- Measurements: non-breaking space between number and abbreviated unit: 17 km.
- Currency figures: £1,500, $4.2 million.
- Percentages: 5 per cent in main text; 5% in tables.
- Maximum elision of page numbers, eg 264–9.
- Cross-references to chapters, figures and tables: 'Chapter 4', 'Figure 3.2', 'Table 5.2'.

## Resources

### Online resources

- Beth Hill (on The Editor's Blog): 'Numbers in fiction': **theeditorsblog.net/2013/01/13/numbers-in-fiction**
- Graham Hughes (GH Editorial): 'Dos and don'ts with dates': **gh-ed.com/blog/dos-and-donts-with-dates**
- Helen Stevens (Saltaire Editorial Services): 'Proofreading numbers: less about maths, more about common sense': **saltedit.co.uk/blog/proofreading-numbers-less-about-maths-more-about-common-sense**
- Intelligent Editing: PerfectIt: **intelligentediting.com/product/introduction**
- Paul Beverley (Archive Publications): 'Macros for editors': **archivepub.co.uk/book.html**
- Word MVP: 'Finding and replacing characters using wildcards': **wordmvp.com/FAQs/General/UsingWildcards.htm**

### Books

Butcher, J, Drake, C and Leach, M (2006). Chapter 6, 'House style'. In *Butcher's Copy-editing*. 4th edn. Cambridge University Press, 117–66. Also see 'Tables', 220–9, and 'Units', 322–4.

Waddingham, A (2014). Chapter 11, 'Numbers and dates'. In *New Hart's Rules*. 2nd edn. Oxford University Press, 186–204. Also see chapter 14, 'Science, mathematics, and computing', and chapter 15, 'Lists and tables'.

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