



When to Write Numbers as Words

Should you write *nine* or *9*? *Twenty-one* or *21*? Writing guides do not always agree, but a few consistent choices will make your numbers easier to read.

Choose a starting rule

Albert Joseph, in *Put It in Writing!* (1998), recommends spelling out one through nine and using numerals for 10 and above. I like that rule because it is easy to remember.

Lynn Troyka offers another approach in *Quick Access: Reference for Writers* (2001): spell out numbers that take one or two words, unless numbers appear frequently.

Neither approach works for every situation. If you are following a publication's style guide, use its rule; otherwise, choose an approach and apply it consistently.

Clarity matters more than making every number in a sentence look alike. For example: "Over four days, the number of volunteers rose from 5 to 8 to 17 to 233." Here, *four* describes the days, while the numerals show a sequence of volunteer counts.

Handle common exceptions

At the start of a sentence, spell out the number. "Six percent of the students voted." If the number is unwieldy, recast the sentence: "A total of 150,235 people responded."

Use numerals for precise measurements and decimals. Write *5 miles* or *0.79 inches*. Put a zero before a decimal less than one: *0.07*, rather than *.07*. Large round amounts are often clearest as a mix of numerals and words, such as *\$4 billion*.

Hyphenate spelled-out numbers from twenty-one through ninety-nine. Examples include *twenty-one* and *eighty-five*.

Spell out simple fractions in ordinary prose. “One-half of the Senate agreed, but a two-thirds majority was required.” Mixed fractions are often written with numerals, as in *4 1/2 cups*.

Dates, decades, and times

Write a date as *June 30* or *the 30th of June*. For decades, write *the 1970s and 1980s* or *the '70s and '80s*. The shortened form needs an apostrophe where the missing digits were; the plural **s** does not.

For time of day, *four fifteen* and *six o'clock* work in conversational prose. Numerals are useful for precise times: “The train leaves at 6:22 a.m.” Choose one form of *a.m.* and *p.m.* and use it consistently. For clarity, say *noon* or *midnight* instead of *12:00 p.m.* or *12:00 a.m.*

My number one pet peeve

Advertisements promising “100s of models” or “1,000’s of satisfied customers” make me wince. If you mean an approximate quantity, write *hundreds of models* or *thousands of satisfied customers*. It reads naturally, and no one has to puzzle over the shorthand.

Joseph’s rule remains my favorite starting point. The larger lesson is to let your style guide and your reader’s needs settle the exceptions.

For more examples, see [Purdue OWL’s guidance on numbers](#) and [The Blue Book of Grammar and Punctuation’s number rules](#).