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Numbers: To Spell or Not to Spell

In text, the general rule for numbers is to use words for numbers below 10 and numerals for numbers 10 and above. As with so many other aspects of grammar and punctuation, however, there are exceptions to this guideline. In addition to expressing numbers 10 and above, there are several other instances to use numerals rather than words.

Use Numerals

Tables and Figures:

Use numerals in a table or figure in a paper; this allows for brevity.

Units of Measure:

Use numerals before a unit of measurement.

Examples: 2.54 cm, 1.5 gal

Statistical or Mathematical Functions, Fractional or Decimal Quantities, Percentages, Ratios, Percentiles, and Quartiles:

Examples: Divided by 2, 0.6, 5% of the participants, a ratio of 3:1, the 5th percentile

Times, Dates, Ages, Addresses, Scores and Point Values on a Scale, Exact Sums of Money, and Figures:

Examples: 1 hr 30 min, 9:00 am, 8-year-olds, a 5-point scale, \$1

*Exception: Use words for *approximations* of numbers of days, weeks, months, or years.

Example: About six months ago

Specific Places in a Numbered Series, Parts of Books and Tables, and Each Number in a List of Four or More Numbers:

Example: Illustration 1

In addition to using words to express numbers below 10, words are appropriate in several other situations.

Use Words

The Beginning of a Sentence, Title, or Text Heading:

Example: Fifteen participants were in the control group.

Common Fractions:

Example: Three-fourths of the population

Common Phrases or Groups:

Examples: Seven Wonders of the World, The Three Musketeers

Paper Abstract

Use words for the numbers zero through nine in the abstract. This is a new rule in APA 7th edition.

Other Rules Concerning Numbers:

When using two modifiers with a noun, use a combination of numerals and words.

Example: Three 5-point scales

If you're unsure about which modifier to write and which to express numerically, try it both ways. Be sure the way you express the numbers is in the clearest way possible.

Although the examples given for when to spell and when not to spell numbers is pretty comprehensive, once in a while you might need additional information. In such a case, if you are using a particular citation style, such as APA or AMA, consult the style manual for the specific guidelines.