

# Numbers in academic writing

The rules for using numbers in academic writing vary among academic disciplines. The conventions described here are for NON-TECHNICAL academic prose where numbers are not a significant focus. Scientific and technical writing will have their own conventions and students should consult a manual dedicated to those standards. The main rules about the use of numbers in standard academic writing are about:

1. when to spell out the numbers in words
2. how to avoid confusion with numbers in a sentence
3. when to use digits for numbers
4. how to write numbers correctly



GRAMMAR CHECKERS will not help you with the acceptable presentation of numbers in academic writing. You need to know and use the conventions for writing numbers correctly when you are writing and proofreading your work.

## 1. When to spell out numbers in words

### ❖ Spell out one or two-word numbers, rounded numbers and ordinal numbers

For general academic writing, spell out all numbers under one hundred. Also, spell out rounded numbers (e.g. four hundred, two thousand, six million) and ordinal numbers (e.g. third, twenty-fifth). *Exceptions: see 3. When to use digits for numbers*

#### Examples

- ✓ The country had been at war for twenty-five years. (number under 100)
- ✓ Over four hundred soldiers were sent to the war zone. (rounded numbers)
- ✓ The thirty-eighth battalion was sent to the war zone for the fourth time. (ordinal numbers)

### ❖ Spell out numbers beginning a sentence

Either spell out the number, or if that's awkward, then rewrite the sentence to avoid beginning the sentence with a numeral. *Exception: beginning a sentence with a date.*

#### Examples

- ✗ 130 student volunteers joined the university peace mission.
- ✓ One hundred and thirty student volunteers joined the university peace mission. (in words)
- ✗ 75 percent of the rental properties were occupied by students.
- ✓ Students occupied 75 percent of the rental properties in the town. (rewrite)
- ✓ 2008 was a good year to commence university studies. (beginning with a date)

### ❖ Spell out approximate numbers and some times of the day

In non-technical academic writing, spell out the number for approximate figures (including fractions) and for full, half and quarter hour times.

#### Examples

- ✓ about half the students; a quarter of the university; four times as often; hundreds of times
- ✓ six o'clock, half past six, quarter past seven, quarter to nine, midday, midnight

## 2. How to avoid confusion with numbers in a sentence

### ❖ Avoid confusion when using two numbers together (run-on numbers) or when dealing with several numbers in a single sentence

#### Examples

- ✓ There were 32 third-grade students participating in the test. (run-on numbers)
- ✓ The computer laboratory has 24 thirty-centimetre monitors. (run-on numbers)
- ✓ At least 28 million people lived in the region where a 1500 dollar a year support allowance was given for each student's education fees. (be consistent—write both numbers in digits or words)

### 3. When to use digits for numbers

❖ Use digits for numbers greater than one hundred and in following situations

Use digits for	Examples
Numbers above 100	✓ Use digits (e.g. counted 3968 books on the shelves).
Money	✓ Use digits for exact amounts (e.g. \$24.28), but use digits and words for rounded and large amounts (e.g. 98 dollars; \$15 million)
Measurements	✓ Always use digits with a measurement symbol (e.g. 32 °C or 32 degrees centigrade; 6 cm or 6 centimetres)
Percentages	✓ Use digits for percentage. (e.g. over 55 per cent (or 55%), of students passed the examination.
Fractions & decimals	<p>✓ <b>Fractions</b> can be written in digits or words (e.g. <math>\frac{2}{3}</math> or two-thirds). If using words, join the fraction parts with a hyphen.</p> <p>✓ <b>Decimals</b> give exact amounts in digits (e.g. 0.45 not .45; 2.36)</p>
Surveys	✓ Write results in digit form. A survey of participants revealed that 4 out of 5 students worked.
Scores	✓ Write scores in digit form. (Students scored 8 to 75 out of 100.)
Statistics	✓ The survey focused on 90 teachers, 10 principals and 24 auxiliary staff from 20 different schools.
Eras (time spans)	✓ the eighteenth century or the 18 <sup>th</sup> century; from the 1960s to the 1990s; during the 2000s; in 2300 BC (before Christ); in 1770 AD ( <i>anno Domini</i> , after Christ)
Dates	✓ Wednesday 23 February 2008 (use this order)
Time of day	✓ 9 am or 9.00 am or 8.22 pm (when exact time is important). IF you are NOT using 'am' or 'pm', THEN WRITE OUT THE TIME IN WORDS (e.g. the eight-thirty bus; four o'clock in the afternoon). For midday and midnight, write in words—do not use 12 am and 12 pm.
Spans of numbers	✓ pages: 56-74, 115-17; years: 1864-99, 1998-2008; streets 36-99 Spa St
Divisions in a book	✓ Use digits to refer to divisions in books and plays (e.g. volume 5, chapter 6, page 45; act 2, scene 4)

### 4. How to write numbers correctly

❖ Use particular conventions for writing digits in modern Australian texts

- Numbers 1–9999 do NOT use spaces or commas (e.g. 3, 33, 333, 3333—note that you NOT use a space for four digit numbers)
- Numbers 10 000–999 999 have a single space between the hundred and thousands. (e.g. There were 287 701 participants in the survey.)
- Numbers from 1 000 000 have a single space between millions and thousands, and between thousands and hundreds (e.g. The population of this Australian city was 2 467 789 on the 3 December 2008.)

❖ Use particular conventions for writing numbers in words

- Large numbers written in words have a comma where spaces are used in the digital format (e.g. 3 206 411 = three million, two hundred and six thousand, four hundred and eleven)
- For two digit numbers and fractions, use hyphens (e.g. 94 = ninety-four;  $\frac{3}{8}$  = three-eighths)