# Formatting Numbers

In general, writers tend to spell out numbers that can be written in one or two words and use numerals for numbers that are three or more words long. In addition, APA, MLA and Chicago style guides advise **a number must always be spelled out if it begins a sentence.** However, each style guide has other rules governing when to use words or numerals. Below is an overview of how to format numbers in **APA** (American Psychological Association) style, **MLA** (Modern Language Association) style, and the **Chicago Manual of Style**.

## APA (7th edition)

APA is widely used in the social sciences and in other data-driven fields, and has the most detailed guidelines regarding numbers. APA’s general rule is to **spell out zero through nine** and to **use numerals for numbers 10 and above**. However, there are several exceptions to this broad rule, which are listed below.

**Always spell out numbers when**

* A number begins a sentence. APA advises that a numeral should never begin a sentence, nor should a numeral begin a title or a section heading (e.g. “Twenty people enrolled in the class, but 15 dropped out”).
* Expressing common fractions (e.g. “a two-thirds majority”).
* Expressing common, universally accepted phrases or concepts that involve numbers (e.g. “Twelve Apostles” and “Five Pillars of Islam”).

**Always use numerals for**

* Numbers that immediately come before a unit of measurement (e.g. “5-mg dose” or “3 cm”).
* Statistical or mathematical functions (e.g. “multiply by 2”).
* Fractions or decimals (*except* common fractions) (e.g. “3/7” or “2.27”).
* Percentages, ratios, percentiles, and quartiles (e.g. “75%” or “a 4:1 ratio” or “5th percentile” or “3rd quartile”)
* Times and dates, including approximations of time (e.g. “30 s” or “10 min” or “12:30 a.m.” or “3 decades” or “2 days”).
* Ages (e.g. “5 years old”).
* Scores and points on a scale (e.g. “she scored 6 on a 7-point scale”).
* Exact sums of money (e.g. “I owe you $10”).
* Numerals as numerals (e.g. “press numeral 2 on the computer keyboard”).

Additionally, APA style has stipulations regarding **numbers in a series**. Always use numerals for numbers that denote a specific place in a numbered series when the number comes *after* the noun (e.g. “Step 1”). Note that the noun before the number is always capitalized. This guideline also applies to parts of books and tables (e.g. “Chapter 1”). However, when the number comes *before* the noun, spell out numbers zero through nine and use numerals for numbers 10 and above (e.g. “the fifth grade” versus “the 11th grade”). Note: Do not capitalize the abbreviations for pages or paragraphs, even when they are followed by a numeral (e.g. p. 3, pp. 2–5, para. 9, paras. 1–4).

Source: American Psychological Association. (2019). *Numbers*. APA Style. <https://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines/numbers/index>.

## MLA (8th edition)

**In papers or projects that require few numbers**, spell out all numbers that can be written in a word or two and express other numbers using numerals (e.g. one, thirty-six, ninety-nine, one hundred, fifteen hundred, but 2 1⁄2, 101, 137, 1,275). Pluralize a spelled-out number like you would any ordinary noun (e.g. “sixes” or “sevens”).

**If your paper or project calls for a frequent use of numbers**, use numerals for:

* All numbers that come before technical units of measurement (e.g. “30 inches” and “5 kilograms”).
* Abbreviations or symbols (e.g. “6 lbs.” or “4:00 p.m.” or “$3.50”).
* Street addresses (e.g. “4401 13th Avenue”).
* Dates (e.g. “11 April 2006”).
* Decimal fractions (e.g. “8.3”).
* Items in numbered series (e.g. “year 3” or “chapter 9” or “volume 1”) or in documentation

(e.g. “ch. 1” or “vol. 1”).

* Numbers that are presented together and that refer to similar things, such as in comparisons or reports of experimental data (e.g. “France’s GDP rose 3% while Germany’s fell by 1%”).

Similar to APA style, MLA advises that **when a numeral falls at the start of a sentence**, either spell out the number (if doing so is not awkward) or revise the sentence to place the numeral later in it. Also note that large numbers may be expressed in a combination of numerals and words (e.g. “4.5 million”). Outside of the above exceptions, remember that all other numbers should be spelled out in words if they can be written in one or two words.

For **a range of numbers**, give the second number in full for numbers up to ninety-nine (e.g. “2-3” or “89-99”). For a range of larger numbers, give only the last two digits of the second number, unless more are necessary for clarity (e.g. “96-101” or “923-1,003” or “1,608-774”).

Source: “Numbers.” *MLA Handbook,* 8th ed., Modern Language Association, 2016, pp. 92-3.

## CHICAGO (17th edition)

Chicago notes that their guidelines for numbers apply **mainly to general works and to scholarly works in the humanities and social sciences**, where numeric quantities are relatively infrequent. Their general rule (for nontechnical works) is to **spell out whole numbers from zero to one hundred.** Additionally, whole numbers one through one hundred that are followed by “hundred,” “thousand,” “hundred thousand,” “million,” or “billion” are usually spelled out (except in the sciences or with monetary amounts), whether used exactly or as approximations (e.g. “some forty-seven thousand persons attended the fair” versus “the official attendance at this year’s fair was 47,122”).

If a year must begin a sentence, always spell it out, but it is usually preferable to simply reword the sentence. Of the three styles, **Chicago privileges flexibility and consistency**. If many numbers occur within a paragraph or a series of paragraphs, maintain consistency. For example, if you use numerals for one number in a given category, use numerals for all numbers in that same category.

Source: "9: Numbers,” in The Chicago Manual of Style, 17th ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017. https://doi.org/10.7208/cmos17