

# 17. Numbers

## General guidelines

As a rule, in text, whole numbers from one to ten should be expressed in words, not figures, except for:

- numbers used with an ISO code: **USD 6**
- percentages (see below): **5%**
- numbers associated with measurement units: **3 km**
- numbers followed by “million”, “billion” or “trillion”: **1 million, 3 billion**.

**NOTE** ▶ In English, the OECD uses the International System of Units (SI) short scale. Therefore, **billion** = thousand million ( $10^9$ ), and **trillion** = thousand billion ( $10^{12}$ ). However, the long scale (*échelle longue*) is used in French: i.e. **milliard** = *mille millions* ( $10^9$ ) and **billion** = *mille milliards* ( $10^{12}$ ).

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| Whole numbers greater than ten are usually expressed in figures. When numbers less than ten and greater than ten occur together in context, write them all in figures.  | <b>At the meeting, 12 member countries and 3 non-member economies raised the same issue.</b> |
| When two numbers refer to one item, spell out one of them and express the other in figures.   | <b>They requested four 1-metre stands.<br/>They requested 36 ninety-centimetre stands.</b>   |
| A number should always be written out in full at the beginning of a sentence.   | <b>Twelve member countries brought forth the same issue.</b>                                 |
| Round off large numbers, particularly in text.  | <b>1.2 billion</b> (rather than “1 198 650 000”)   |
| Do not use commas for numbers in the thousands. Add a hard space for four-digit numbers and above.<br><br><b>NOTE</b> ▶ As English and French conventions for large numbers differ, the OECD has adopted the rule that, for all texts in all languages, numbers containing four or more digits are broken by spaces, not punctuation marks. | <b>2 618<br/>32 518<br/>7 519 000</b>  |
| Use hard spaces.  | <b>1#495#610</b>   |

**NOTES** › Use “per thousand” in chapter titles and headings but the abbreviated form “per ‘000” in text, tables and figures.

- › For web content, write numbers as digits, not words, and do not use a space in four-digit numbers or above.

**See also:** *Abbreviations and acronyms*, pp. 52–55; *Units of measure*, pp. 54–55; *Breaks and hard spaces*, p. 65; *Dates and time*, pp. 75–76; *Percentages*, p. 88.

## Decimal and non-decimal fractions

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| Numbers containing decimal fractions should always be written in numbers.<br><b>NOTE</b> › All decimal fractions are plural in English.   | <b>The average family has 2.4 children.</b><br><b>The annual inflation rate reached 5.8%.</b><br><b>1.9 points</b>   |
| Always use a decimal point, never a comma or any other mark. Before decimal fractions smaller than one, use a zero, never a blank space.  | <b>0.45</b> (not “.45”)<br><b>0.25</b> (not “¼”)   |
| When using with a currency, always either round up or round down to a full number or take to the second digit.  | <b>USD 0.02</b> (for two cents)<br><b>EUR 0.20</b> (for 20 cents)  |
| In general, use only readily recognisable fractions such as “one-third”, “one-half”, etc. Convert others to decimals: it is easier for readers to consider “80%” than “four-fifths”. Write them in words, not numbers (note the hyphens). | <b>Three-quarters of the legislators voted for the resolution.</b><br><b>The Senate approved the bill by a two-thirds majority.</b><br><b>Two-and-a-half years passed before the project could be completed.</b><br><b>Some 80% of the territory is uninhabited.</b> |

## Negative sums

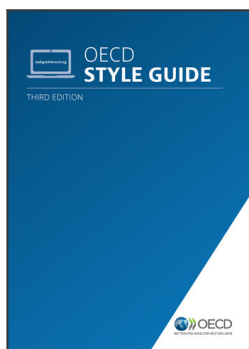
|   |  |
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| When indicating negative sums, always use a hyphen (not an en-dash) for the minus sign, and leave no space between it and the number.<br><b>NOTE</b> › In the case of currencies, put the ISO code before the minus sign. | <b>-500, -4.7</b><br><br><b>CAD -225</b> |
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## Ordinal numbers

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| Avoid the adverbial form of ordinal numbers to introduce successive paragraphs or points.  | <b>Secondly</b> and <b>thirdly</b> may fall gently on the ear, but by about <b>eighthly</b> it will all sound awkward. Use <b>first</b> , <b>second</b> , <b>eighth</b> , etc. (and not 1st, 2nd, etc.). |
| Avoid long lists of numbered points as the reader will soon lose track. If the list has to be longer, try to separate the ideas with text. | <b>In addition to these three main points, two further arguments include such issues as...</b>   |

## Percentages

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| Use “%” in all cases (text and graphics) except in chapter titles and headings.<br>Use “percentage” without a number and always spell out “percentage points”.              | <b>More than 90% of the respondents agreed, while fewer than 10% had no opinion.</b><br><b>The percentage of total revenues decreased by 1.8 percentage points.</b> |
| When percentages include a decimal point, ensure that all percentages listed are rounded to one decimal point.<br>Never use the symbol with a word: “three %” is incorrect. | <b>The inflation rate rose by 12.0%, voter turnout reached 75.4%.</b><br><br><b>3%</b>  |
| Do not use the % sign with non-decimal fractions.   | <b>3.5%</b> is acceptable; 3 1/2% is not.   |
| Repeat the % sign after each number in a series.  | <b>12, 15 and 18 years</b><br>but: <b>45%, 55% and 65%</b>  |
| The % sign should be repeated in cases where ranges are separated by prepositions but not after a non-breaking hyphen.  | <b>10% to 20%</b><br>but: <b>10-20%</b>   |



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