Writing Numbers in MLA Style

Rules for writing numbers in papers vary according to the format and citation style, as well as discipline and subject matter. The following rules are based on the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, seventh edition, published by the Modern Language Association in 2009.

1) **Always** spell out any number that begins a sentence, or reword the sentence so that it does not begin with a number.

   Sixty-five thousand people attended the ball game.
   Over 65,000 people attended the ball game.

2) Generally, spell out numbers that can be written in one or two words. Use numerals for numbers of more than two words.

   The man appeared to be at least seventy-five years old.
   At least 650 people attended the education meeting.

3) The above rule also applies to ordinal numerals (*first, second*, etc.). However, use numerals in addresses and in works cited entries.

   This is the eighth time I've seen that movie.
   He lived at 1405 25th Street.

4) You may write large numbers as a numeral followed by a word.

   The U.S. population is approximately 315 million.

5) Write related numbers in the same style.

   three of the eight kittens
   only 5 of the 435 representatives

6) Use numerals with abbreviations and symbols, in addresses, in dates, in decimal fractions, and in divisions.

   5 lbs.  8 GB  3:40 a.m.  3%  $14
   1405 25th Street  January 1, 2014  9.5
   page 9  act 3  scene 2  line 2

7) When amounts of money and percentages appear infrequently in a paper, they may be written out in words if they consist of three words (including the unit) or fewer. Otherwise, use numerals with the appropriate symbols, as in the above rule.

   three thousand dollars (or) $3,000  twenty-five percent (or) 25%
   seventy-five cents (or) 75¢  $3,040
   $4.99  6.8%
8) Centuries are written out; decades are usually written out, but may be expressed using numerals. Be consistent. Centuries and decades are not capitalized.

   the seventeenth century
   the twenty-first century
   eighteenth-century literature
   the seventies (or) the 1970s (or) the ’70s

9) Use numerals for times of the day in most contexts. Use words when using the term o’clock, or in expressions such as “a quarter after four.”

   7:20 p.m.   5:30 a.m.   three o’clock   half past six

For more information, see pages 81-85 of the *MLA Handbook*, or see a tutor in Reading and Writing Resource Center.