Writing Numbers in APA Style

Rules for writing numbers in papers differ significantly depending on the format and citation style. The American Psychological Association (APA) requires the use of numerals in many situations in which the Modern Language Association (MLA), for example, requires the use of words. APA Style is designed for writing for the behavioral and social sciences, although instructors in other disciplines may require or permit its use.


1) Generally, use words to express numbers below 10. Use numerals to express the numbers 10 and above. This applies to both cardinal numbers and ordinal numbers. See below for exceptions.

   five attempts  500-word vocabulary  eighth grade  10th grade

2) In addition to numbers below 10, use words to express…

   a) any number that begins a sentence, title or text heading. (Whenever possible, reword the sentence so that it does not begin with a number.)

   b) common fractions.

       one fourth of Americans  two-thirds majority

   c) universally accepted usage.

       the Ten Commandments  the Five Pillars of Islam
       the Four Noble Truths  the Twelve Apostles

   d) approximations of numbers of days, months, and years.

       about four years ago

3) APA rules (section 4.31) require the use of numerals when expressing…

   a) numbers in the abstract of a paper.
   b) numbers in graphical displays.
   c) numbers that immediately precede a unit of measure.

       2 cm  an 8-oz serving

   d) numbers that represent statistical or mathematical functions, fractional or decimal quantities, percentages, ratios, and percentiles.

       multiplied by 3  0.6 of the total  47% of the total  a ratio of 3:1
e) numbers that represent time, dates, ages, scores and points on a scale, and exact sums of money.

2 hr 21 min  5-year-olds  5:30 a.m.  measured 6 on a 7-point scale

f) numbers that denote a specific place in a numbered series and the numbered parts of books and tables.

Table 3  row 5  Chapter 2 of the text  Figure 3

g) each number in a list of four or more numbers.

4) To improve readability, use a combination of numerals and words to express consecutive numbers used as modifiers, as in the following examples from the *Publication Manual* (section 4.33).

2 two-way interactions  ten 7-point scales

In some cases, however, readability may be reduced by the application of this rule. In such cases, use words to express both numbers. For example, the *Publication Manual* states that “first two items” is correct while “1st two items” and “first 2 items” are incorrect based on readability.

5) Use Roman numerals when part of established terminology.

Type I error  type III hypersensitivity

Note that Arabic numerals are used for the two types of diabetes.

type 1 diabetes  type 2 diabetes

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**Note:** Do not use periods with abbreviations of *units of measure*, whether metric or non-metric, except at the end of a sentence. However, for the abbreviation of *inch* and *inches*, use a period (in.) to distinguish the abbreviation from the word *in*. Also, do not add an *s* to any abbreviation of a *unit of measure* to make it plural. For additional information on abbreviations see section 4.02 (p. 88) and sections 4.22–4.30 (pp.106–111) of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*.

For complete information on the use of numbers in APA Style, see sections 4.31–4.38 (pp.111–114) of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*.