

# Numbers: *figures* or *words*

## *A convention under the spotlight*

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In *Clarity* No 49 we presented all numbers as figures, not as words, even single- and double-digit numbers:

This step was tackled in 2 ways.

This article explains why we abandoned the convention on numbers.

### *The advantages of figures*

In legal documents—as in most documents—it is the quantity or value expressed by a number that is significant for readers. Printing numbers as figures rather than as words helps readers grasp the message more readily. A figure stands out sharply from the rest of the text, as this example illustrates vividly:

A wealthy father cut the throats of his four daughters ...  
killed the girls, aged nine, 12,  
14 and 18

The age of the first child is lost among the words whereas the other 3 can be identified immediately.

Moreover in calculations we are used to dealing with numbers as figures rather than as words. Using words for numbers moves readers into less familiar patterns.

There is a subsidiary advantage in allowing all numbers to appear as figures rather than insisting that some must appear as words. Writers are not burdened with trying to remember and cope with arbitrary rules and so can concentrate on the critical goal of achieving clarity. The less we distract them from this task with unnecessary variations the better the results.

### *A teetering convention*

For all its widespread acceptance among writers and editors, the convention that certain numbers must occur as words has a strong streak of irrationality about it. Its persistence despite this attribute probably arises because few have closely analysed formulations of the convention but have simply bowed to it on the word or command of others.

To avoid the possibility of bias in the selection of a formulation, I reproduce a statement of the convention as it appeared in *Clarity* No 29 (page 14):

Where science and mathematics are not involved, the best practice is to spell out all numbers, cardinal or ordinal, smaller than 101. (Another common practice—the convention followed in science and mathematics—is to spell out only numbers smaller than 11; this less formal practice is perfectly acceptable in legal writing.)

This was reprinted from Bryan Garner's *The Elements of Legal Style* (though he may simply have been setting the convention out and not necessarily advocating it). It is not idiosyncratic and can be found in similar if not exact formulations in most house style manuals. (Some put the boundaries for words to be used at numbers smaller than 100 and 10.)

Displayed in cold light like this, the convention becomes puzzling. It immediately prompts the question why the rule applies only to single- and double-digit numbers. If 8 and 88 have to appear as words, why not 888?

Again, if double-digit numbers can be liberated to appear as figures in mathematical documents, why cannot single-digit figures be freed also? Surely *4 days* is more in keeping than *four days* with the nature of a mathematical work? It certainly would be preferable in a legal text. The mind boggles at such fastidious distinctions.

Equally puzzling is the insistence that in texts other than science and mathematics numbers are best spelt out. The [Australian] *Style Manual* (AusInfo: Canberra 1998 fifth edition: 185) provides a clue:

Words are preferred...in descriptive and narrative texts where figures would be unduly prominent and generally unsympathetic to the flow and appearance of the text.

This is highly subjective given that the *Style Manual* restricts the rule to numbers under 100 (page 189). Wouldn't 4,257 be even more unsympathetic! It is somewhat precious, perpetuating the myth that figures are too forbidding for the artistic.

It is also becoming an unsteady convention. My impression is that more and more in Australia are limiting the rule to numbers under 10 in all types of texts. *The Australian Journal of Linguistics* states in its house-style:

Numbers from one to nine should be written out in full: figures should be used for numbers above 10.

*The Sydney Morning Herald*, a major newspaper, exhibits the same practice:

...a spiral ramp nearly 35 metres long  
(2 August 2003)

Over the past 20 years...  
(2 August 2003)

Random questioning of writers confirms that this is their notion of the convention. Perhaps the drift will continue until all numbers are presented as figures. Since people have been prepared to exclude 10-99 from the ambit of the convention, it is surprising the final step has not already been taken.

### *A neglected modification*

The last part of the formulation of the convention in *Clarity* No 29 introduces a modification:

When, in the same context, some numbers are above the cut-off point and some below, the style for the larger numbers determines the style for the smaller ones.

The amendment is commendable but many are either not aware of it or do not support it. Here are just 2 examples picked up in casual reading in the days before I was preparing this article:

WCM, which employs 85 nationals and five expatriates, runs grassroots community activities in around 160 remote rural communities.

*Go (continue 2003) 12*

There were 16 people in our group—14 paying customers and two guides.

*The Sydney Morning Herald 19 July 2003*

It would appear that the base form of the rule has become so firmly ingrained that many follow it rigidly, unaware of its scope for some variation.

### *A host of exceptions*

While advocating the rule, most style manuals proceed to list copious exceptions. The article in *Clarity* No 29 had 5; other manuals run to 8 or 10. They include:

- dates: 7 August 2003—not Seven August two thousand and three
- monetary amounts: \$5—not \$ five
- percentages: 5%—not five %
- fractions: 4.3.

On the basis of these exceptions—or loopholes—a lot of numbers end up as figures in texts. Why then bother with the rule at all? If so many numbers can appear as figures, why not let all of them?

### *In the beginning*

In her article in *Clarity* No 49 (page 5), Claire Grose began a sentence—and a paragraph—with a figure:

3 examples of changes to the law ... demonstrate some of the benefits ...

According to the convention this is taboo. 'Always begin a sentence with a word, not a figure' (*The Little Book of Style* page 69). But as so often in the plain language environment, one is constrained to ask 'Why not?'

Perhaps the prohibition on figures at the beginning of sentences is an issue of typographical of design taste: in the past people may not have liked the look of figures in the first position, just as the first paragraph used not to be num-

bered in a document, with the numbering starting only at the second paragraph. It cannot be that sentences are supposed to begin with a capital. Such a rule can only apply to words that do not normally begin with an upper case letter. The concepts of upper and lower case do not apply to figures: they are both or neither. Nor can the objection to having a figure at the beginning of a sentence be based on the fact that a single-digit number might look too nondescript, because many sentences already start with a single letter—I or A—not to mention the poets' O (which tantalisingly could also represent the mathematicians' zero).

A book on theology, N Weeks *The Sufficiency of Scripture* (Edinburgh: 1988), offers an interesting, if unintended, illustration of the issue. Following custom, the publisher, Banner of Truth Trust, does not italicise the individual books of the Bible, with the result that we find sentences such as:

- Hebrews is full of arguments from Old Testament history. (page 48)
- Psalm 17 is the most interesting of them. (page 17)

However, some books of the Bible occur in pairs or triplets, for example 1 Samuel, 2 Samuel, 3 John. The publisher has grasped the nettle and allowed these books to appear at the beginning of sentences also:

- 1 Corinthians 15:21, 22 confirms Paul's approach... (page 109)

This is a far better solution than having to switch, as we did in the past, to clumsy circumlocutions such as:

- Verses 21 and 22 in 1 Corinthians 15 ...

How unremarkable and inoffensive the solution is comes to light when a sentence beginning with a figure occurs in the midst of a paragraph:

- We are told of the disease in his old age (v.23). 2 Chronicles 14-16 is also a description of Asa's reign. It is clearly based on the account in Kings... (page 57)

### *An open-minded perspective*

I do not regard this matter as a major battleground in plain language but its exploration exposes how we can lapse into accepting—and even maintaining—conventions uncritically—conventions that only place fetters on language, hampering it from fulfilling its real purpose of transmitting a message clearly and enlightening others.

Nor does it bother me that plain language practitioners move to figures while others in the community hold to the old convention. Having both practices in operation would not create any disturbance for readers. After all we already cope with variation in texts comfortably. We adjust readily to different practices in spelling when reading American texts

(*installment* for *instalment*), and to different senses when reading British texts (*spring* referring to March-May). There is some point in requiring consistency within a document but not across documents or continents.

When the drive for plain language sprang to life in the 1970s, we were constantly confronted by the argument that 'you cannot change this clause. This is the way it has always been written'. If we had not challenged this adherence to convention, there would be no plain language documents today. We should adopt the same pose with numbers. There is no principled reason that they should not all appear as figures. Certainly we should not block authors if they want to use figures or look down on them as if they acted in ignorance. On the contrary, they are showing a commendable preference for plainness over empty tradition.

It is instructive how few people notice—or comment—when all numbers occur as figures in a document. I suspect that, if we abandoned the convention quietly and without fuss, within a short time everyone would have forgotten its existence, as has happened in our plain language experience with so many other conventions. It serves no real purpose in conveying meaning or helping readers.

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