

Excerpt from handout, "Danger! Numbers in the Newsroom!"
Compiled by Sarah Cohen, The Washington Post

Writing with Numbers

- Readers want people, not numbers. When you can't report on people — politicians, regular people, people in business or effects on people — at least keep your story short.
- A well-selected number, or set of numbers, can add depth and breadth to many spot news stories. Look for opportunities to put an event in perspective by gathering statistics on the growth, decline or scope of a seemingly isolated event.
- The most effective writing comes from selection, not compression, of facts. It's also true with numbers. Choose only the numbers that have meaning to your readers.
- Consider charting numbers instead of writing them. Removing them from the text not only improves your story; it often makes a bigger impression on readers.
- Pepper your story with just the right number in just the right place rather than cramming them all together. Use an anecdote, quote or observation to separate paragraphs with lots of numbers.
- Recast as many numbers as possible in simple terms that remove their abstraction. Ratios, rates, pictorial images and rounding can help simplify numbers.
- In a set of related numbers, decide what you want to say and construct a passage to do it as simply as possible. Remember that numbers in dates are just as difficult for readers as other numbers:

Correct: "Spending on redundancy research by the Office of Unessential Affairs rose from \$847 million in fiscal 1994 to \$1.26 billion this year, a 49 percent increase." (Four numbers with 12 digits)

Better: "Over the past fiscal year, the Office of Unessential Affairs increased spending on redundancy research by almost half, to \$1.4 billion." (One number with two digits)

(With apologies to *The Art & Craft of Feature Writing*)

- Images of numbers can help if those numbers are huge and incomprehensible. But although the just-right comparison can work well, the less-than-perfect comparison often falls flat and adds yet more confusion to an already difficult story. If you choose to try it anyway:

Make sure the image fits the story.

Make sure your readers can picture the references.

Avoid cliché images, like dollar bills placed end to end.

Don't insert even more numbers with the image.

Don't ask readers to repeat an image.

Foreign references repeated: "Enough water to submerge the Rich Stadium 1,000 times."

Better. "Enough to submerge Los Angeles a foot deep."

- The bigger the number, the more difficult it is to visualize. Who really knows the difference between \$960 million and \$1 billion? For big numbers, cut them down to size for your readers by expressing them as a ratio or rate, but choose your base carefully.
- For small numbers, put them in perspective for your readers by emphasizing change — or the lack of it.
- Read the *Wall Street Journal*.