

# NUMERACY SKILLS FOR MAGAZINE WRITERS AND EDITORS

## Hotsheets

BY DIANE PETERS, Writer & Editor

"I became a journalist because I was bad at math," many among us have proudly announced to replies of "Me too, man. Me too." Sorry to pop your numberless bubble, but this career path is actually lousy with math.

Editors and writers stumble across stats and dollar bill signs on almost a daily basis. We read the financial statements for a profile of a cool new company, decipher numbers in a health study for a service feature, deal with measurements in design stories and crunch percentages for annual RRSP pieces. Even getting ages right takes a wee bit of smart subtraction.

Then, for stories on everything from crime to parenting, the team wants a big old pile of numbers for art to convert into an infographic. Have you ever had a designer patiently explain to you that a pie chart can only add up to 100%? I have! On the digital side, it's all numbers these days via analytics.

### MATH: GET OVER IT

When we keep singing the same old "I hate math" tune, we miss out on the opportunity to get better at this pivotal work skill.

Instead, let's treat math (and science) like grammar. Unless you are one of the lucky ones who got it drilled into you in elementary school, you've likely perfected your grammar, punctuation and style skills on the fly: memorizing your which versus that, looking up affect versus effect almost every time—just to be sure. Recently, heavy reading into the subject has made me confident in my use of the semicolon.

I propose we take math in hand the same way. Memorize the formulas you need every day. Bookmark helpful web sites so you can look up the stuff that never utterly sinks in. Get over it and prosper.

### WHY MATH MATTERS

When we shut our brains down every time we come across numbers, we put our work at risk. Errors creep into stories. We miss out on where the real controversies lie. We're less effective when interviewing our sources. Most dangerously, we can mislead our readers when the numerical side of our work isn't as balanced, clear and dynamic as the rest of the research.

On the career-path side, we limit our ability to try things like data journalism, hard business and digital strategy.

### FIND YOUR SIGNPOSTS

One way to avoid number blunders is to memorize signposts. For the kinds of stories you regularly write or edit, know the numerical ballpark that's normal. A 1,200 square foot house is average for a small urban home or townhouse. Companies that make \$1 million in annual revenue (also called gross annual revenue, or sales) are pretty small, having a few or just one employees. Large companies make in the billions ([RBC brought in \\$9.64 billion in 2015](#)). The population of Canada is about 35 million while the U.S. is 318 million (hence taking 10 per cent of U.S. stats is an accepted way to estimate how common things like diseases affect Canadians).



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Get comfortable with the endless conversion between metric and imperial. A football field (a useful measurement signpost) is 120 yards, which is 109 metres. Room temperature is 21°C or 69° F.

If you know what's cold, what's big and what's pricey, you can ask better questions, pick up on context quickly and suss out errors early.

## FIRM UP THE LINGO

Those who produce statistics from business, health and other fields contextualize their numbers with complex terms you may or may not truly get. Researchers often state their results as odds ratios and use terms like mean, medium and mode. Financial statements slot numbers into columns called gross profit and net fixed assets.

Memorize the meaning of terms you use on a regular basis. Look up those you come across less often.

During an interview with a source, take care to focus both on getting the actual number correct in your notes (18,000 or 1,800? It's easy to put down the wrong number of zeros or get scrambled if the source says "eighteen hundred") and noting the contextual term. If a business source says "we made \$4 million," confirm if that's gross revenue or net profit (which is minus expenses). If real estate prices rose 5%, was that from last year, last quarter or last month?

## KNOW THY FORMULAS

In the end, you will be doing some math. Fearlessly open that calculator app and play a little with numbers. Run your numbers twice. Check your results with a few logical signposts, and then, for fun, run the numbers again. (Show your work so editors and checkers know what you did and can replicate your results.)

Know how to calculate HST (or whatever your local sales tax is called) for your province if you plan to ever do freelance work, and how to do the math to remit it to the government. Know how to figure out averages, percentage and percentage change.

Allow modern tech to aid you in your quest. There's an online calculator for just about everything out there: work out compound interest or metric conversions on your own, but check them online. Crack open Excel and teach yourself how to input formulas—there is no sweeter way to work through a series of numbers.

Maybe you'll never become a math whiz. But you can be a better content creator and curator if you make friends with the numbers that are a normal (and sometimes awesome) part of this job.

