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Avoiding Numeric Novocain: Writing Well with Numbers

By Chip Scanlan (more by author)

Numbers numb.

That's why writers who want to be read are careful about how they use numbers in their stories.

Bill Blundell was an award-winning reporter for the Wall Street Journal, a newspaper written for a business audience that lives and dies by the numbers.

Even so, as a Journal writer, editor, and writing coach over three decades, Blundell tried to follow a simple rule: "I will try not to let two paragraphs with numbers bump against each other," he says in "Best Newspaper Writing 1982," the year he won the American Society of Newspaper Editors' award for best non-deadline writing.

Buster Olney is a sportswriter for The New York Times, a specialty that relies on an encyclopedic command of statistics that chart a team or player's rise and fall.

But rather than blizzard his readers with numbers, he advises: "Sprinkle them in."

Like Blundell, Olney has a by-the-numbers rule: "No more than two numbers in a graf."

Numbers are news.

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A few years ago, I examined one day's edition of my local newspaper, the St. Petersburg Times, and counted how many of the 130 stories involved numbers. More than one-third did. They were in every section of the paper: news, sports, business, features, editorial page. Numbers figured in these ways:

· Professional sports team purchase.
· Legislation to limit consumer lawsuits
· Questions about local government revenues from new baseball stadium.
· Proposed anti-smoking cigarette tax.
· Presidential campaign donations.
· Social Security's future.
· Drug money laundering.
· Health stories: prostate and breast cancer screenings; male plastic surgery.
· Surveys of people in India about nuclear testing.
· State tax reports.
· Antitrust settlements.
· Mediterranean fruit fly spraying.
· Fees paid lawyers in tobacco lawsuits.
· Personal injury lawsuit verdict.
· Company mergers.
· Minority investments by bank.

· Company earnings.
· Sports statistics: salaries, scores, player performances.
· Feature on cystic fibrosis sufferer's financial woes.

But how effectively are those numbers presented?

Too many stories display numeric overkill, a deadening procession of figures that overwhelm the reader and rob the writer of the opportunity to use numbers in ways that explain and illuminate.

"By using more numbers you're minimizing the numbers that you give them," Olney told newspaper reporters and editors gathered this week for Poynter's "Covering the Beat" seminar. "If you have one great number in there it will have a greater impact."

Even journalists who are good at crunching numbers recognize their power to bog down a story. "No matter how rigorous your analysis, numbers aren't a story," says Jeff South, former database editor for the Austin American-Statesman who now teaches at Virginia Commonwealth University.

South: "You must tell the story in a way that connects with people who don't know a spreadsheet from a cookie sheet."

"As politicians might say: It's the content, stupid. Words, not data, make a story. Your analysis will shape the story; it might be the foundation for the story," South says. "But you must tell the story in a way that connects with people who don't know a spreadsheet from a cookie sheet. And that means, ironically, telling the story almost as if it didn't involve computer analysis."

Mathematics is a precise science, one that requires semantic as well as numerical precision. Even experienced journalists get sloppy when writing with or about numbers.

At *The New York Times*, reporters have been known to use the word shortfall -- which means the quantity or extent by which something falls short -- to mean shortage, decline, unpaid bill, difference, unmet budget, request, debt, remainder and deficit. Avoid jargon. Bureaucrats may use terms such as "revenue" and "expenditures"; keep it simple with "income" and "spending."

Once you've figured out the numbers for your story, the next step is to be able to use them clearly in your writing. Here are some tips to help you use numbers effectively in your stories:

COMPARISON SHOP. "When you do use a figure in a story, put it in context by comparing it to something else. A number has little significance on its own; its true meaning comes from its relative value," says Paul Hemp, an editor for The Boston Globe and author of "Ten Practical Tips for Business and Economic Reporting in Developing Economies."

Whenever Hemp reaches up to the top row of keyboard keys for the numbers 0 through 9, he always stops and asks himself: Compared to what? When you use a statistic, compare it to another time, such as an earlier year, or another place, to something people can relate to. That's what a writer for the Associated Press did in a story about transportation fatalities by comparing the previous year's transportation fatalities with the population of three communities familiar in three major regions of the country:

> WASHINGTON--Travel in America claimed the lives of more than 44,000 people last year -- roughly the population of Wilkes-Barre, Pa., Palatine, Ill., or Covina, Calif.

ROUND OFF AND SUBSTITUTE. Economists and financial experts need exact numbers. Readers don't. So you can say "nearly doubled" or "about one-third" and remain accurate as well as understandable. You don't need to say that burglaries increased 105 percent when you could say they doubled. If 33 percent of the drivers in fatal crashes had alcohol in their blood, it will be clearer if you say, "one in three drivers had been drinking."

THINK VISUALLY -- 1. Collaborate with a visual journalist to take advantage of the power of graphics to display quantitative information. Read this profile of Edward Tufte to understand how a designer thinks about the most effective ways to present numbers.

THINK VISUALLY -- 2. To help readers understand numbers, it's often helpful to relate the numbers to something readers can picture. Make quantities visible in the mind's eye. In an article about the excavation of World War II planes that crashed in the marshes and swamps of the Netherlands, author Les Daly used this vivid picture to convey the enormity of the 7,000 crashes. "To put it another way, the crash of 7,000 aircraft would mean that every square mile of the state of New Jersey would have shaken to the impact of a downed plane."

[**How do you write well with numbers?**]
