Today one of my students asked how to pronounce 1906. Was it "nineteen six" or "nineteen oh six"? He recognized the pattern that in English we tend to read four-digit years as a pair of 2-digit numbers. "Nineteen six" didn't sit right with him though. This is probably because when he learned to tell time in English, he learned that 2:03 is "two oh three", not "two three". So he asked about the years.

Of course, I answered that the latter was correct. You need to add the "o" sound when the tens' digit is a zero. He followed up, "So 804 is eight oh four, right?"

"Well, you can say that, but 'eight hundred and four' is also correct."

"Can you say 'nineteen hundred and six'?"

As the conversation went on, I began to realize that the way we read years is a little complicated. Being a native speaker of English, it comes natural to me so I've never thought about it. But for foreign learners it can be confusing and ambiguous. After my conversation with him I thought about it a little to see if I could find a pattern, and here is what I came up with:

Algorithm for Reading Years

1. If there there are no thousands' or hundreds' digits, read the number as-is. Examples:
   o 54 – "fifty-four"
   o 99 – "ninety-nine"
   o 0 – "zero"
   o 8 – "eight"
2. If there is a thousands' digit but the hundreds' digit is zero, you can read the number as "n thousand and x". If the last two digits are zero, you leave off the "and x" part. Examples:
   o 1054 – "one thousand and fifty-four"
   o 2007 – "two thousand and seven"
   o 1000 – "one thousand"
   o 2000 – "two thousand"
3. If the hundreds' digit is non-zero, you can read the number as "n hundred and x". If the last two digits are zero, you leave off the "and x" part. Examples:
   o 433 – "four hundred and thirty-three"
   o 1492 – "fourteen hundred and ninety-two" (who sailed the ocean blue?)
   o 1200 – "twelve hundred"
   o 600 – "six hundred"
4. The above rule produces some formal and old-fashioned names. Where it exists, it is acceptable to omit "hundred and". If you do, and the tens' digit is zero, you must read that zero as "oh". Examples:
   o 432 – "four thirty-two"
   o 1492 – "fourteen ninety-two"
   o 1908 – "nineteen oh eight"
   o 1106 – "eleven oh six"
5. Finally, though uncommon it is possible to read the years in rule #2 using the systems for rules #3 and #4. Examples:
   o 1054 – "ten hundred and fifty-four" (if this sounds wrong to you, imagine you are watching a documentary on the history channel and the stiff narrator begins: "In the year ten hundred and fifty-four, Pope Leo IX died.")
   o 1054 – "ten fifty-four"
   o 3026 – "thirty twenty-six"
   o 2007 – "twenty oh seven" (if this sounds wrong to you, imagine you live in 1972 and you are reading a science fiction story that starts: "In the year twenty oh seven, the world was overrun by blood-thirsty robots.")

By writing it out I don't think I made it any less-complicated, but for what it's worth there it is.