

Five (5) Reasons to Stop Writing Numbers Like This

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We know you're being inundated with information on Coronavirus, so we thought we'd share something on a different topic.

With precedent being the bedrock of the legal industry, lawyers sometimes fall into the trap of mirroring conventions that they have observed other lawyers follow. Many times, this mirroring occurs without much thought by the writer about the value of the convention. Instead, the writer simply takes for granted that the convention is the “right” way to do things because someone else has done them that way.

Such conventions are not necessarily incorrect, but they last long beyond their usefulness. One (1) such outdated convention is the doubling words and numerals, as illustrated in this sentence. It is completely unnecessary in typed documents.

The convention originated with handwritten documents, in which it was easy for numbers to be confused. (I’ve personally had my scribbled “9” mistaken for a “7”). Numbers also could be altered easily by inserting extra numerals or attempting to transform a 3 into an 8. In fact, the easy alteration of numerals is the reason that we spell out the numbers on our checks (for those of us who still use checks). Still, numerals are easier to read at a glance, and so early legal writers included both.

Yet when legal writers transitioned to typed documents, the word-numeral doublet persisted.

Consider deleting word-numeral doublets from your documents and contracts for the following five (5) reasons:

1. When a word-numeral doublet appears in a list of two (2) or more items, it can create ambiguity, especially where (a) there are other subdivisions midsentence, or (b) there are midsentence docket citations [2] such as this one.
2. Word-numeral doublets create stumbling blocks in the middle of sentences that slow the reader and inhibit reading comprehension.
3. The convention invites ambiguity-creating mistakes if the word and the numeral do not match.
4. Legal writing experts, including Ross Guberman and Bryan Garner, consistently advocate abandoning it as part of the transition to plain English writing.
5. [Less than 1% of judges](#) prefer word-numeral doublets while 73% dislike the convention.

Ambiguity has no chance to disrupt a contract or a brief when numbers are written as words or numerals, but not both. But when text and numerals are doubled, there is always the chance for an ambiguous typo to sneak in and cause the two not to match.

Word-numeral doublets have no real benefit in typed documents, and they should be discarded as the legal industry transitions more and more towards plain English writing.

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