

## To Round or Not to Round--That Is the Question

Some of the most insidious misuses of "statistics" show up in television commercials. Unlike ad writers, other business professionals seldom purposefully mislead. But carelessness with statistics can confuse readers.

If there's one common characteristic in most technical writing, it's a document chock-full of jargon, symbols, abbreviations, and numbers. If the subject is already a complex one, the numbers and symbols add to its complexity.

So you need to handle all numbers, statistics, and symbols with your purpose in mind. Are you using the numbers to create a specific effect--to entertain, to educate, to create awareness, to caution, to persuade, or simply to show that you've done your homework?

Your purpose will dictate your plan and your precision.

In the testing and procedural sections of a document, of course, you will give numbers that are appropriately precise because readers of these sections will need to know specifics. But when you summarize the major conclusions in an executive overview, be cautious about statistical overkill. Rounded numbers are easier to grasp quickly and to remember ("about 50 percent" rather than "52.1 percent").

How authoritative is your document? If you have to tell someone how authoritative it is, it isn't.

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