

Using Metrics Correctly

By Bob Baumel

A major reason for going metric is international standardization. It defeats the purpose somewhat if we fail to use these units in an internationally standard manner.

When referring to the “metric system” we actually mean “SI” the international abbreviation for *LeSystème International d’Units* (The International System of Units), which is the term adopted in 1960 for the modernized form of the metric system.

When using SI Units, it is never acceptable to make up abbreviations peculiar to a particular language. Every unit has a standard international symbol which is written the same way in *all* languages (even languages like Hebrew and Chinese that use other alphabets). In writing these symbols, capitalization is significant; for example, “mg” denotes milligram (one-thousandth of a gram), while “Mg” denotes megagram (one million grams).

The symbol for “kilometer” is the two-letter combination “km” where both letters must **always be written in the lower-case** (even when part of a title).

Some additional rules for SI symbols: Never place a period after an SI symbol (except at the end of a sentence); **these are symbols, not abbreviations**. Always include a space between the number and unit symbol; for example, “10 km”, not “10km”. SI symbols never change in the plural; e.g., “1 m” and “3 m” denote 1 meter and 3 meters (Never add “s” in an attempt to pluralize a symbol; note: “3 ms” denotes 3 milliseconds, not 3 meters).

Another rule is that when writing numerical quantities smaller than one, always include a zero before the decimal marker; e.g., “0.43 m”, not “.43 m”.

The commonly used term “5K” is not correct SI notation. If a space is added between the number and the unit symbol (i.e., “5 K”), it does become a valid SI quantity, but it’s not a distance; it’s a very cold temperature of “five kelvins”---just 5 degrees above absolute zero.

One other usage issue, involving proper pronunciation rather than writing: The correct pronunciation of “kilometer” is **kill**-o-meter, not ki-**lahm**-eter. All SI units with prefixes are pronounced with the accent on the *first* syllable; e.g., millimeter, centimeter, kilogram, kilowatt (Try accenting these on the second syllable to see how they sound). Words like barometer, speedometer, and thermometer are accented on the second syllable, but denote measuring devices, not units of measurements.

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