

Time and time again

by Alistair Reeves

Just like the date [1], such an apparently simple matter as the time still causes much consternation amongst writers. Time is not a simple matter, especially in laboratory, pre-clinical, and phase I studies, and can wreak havoc if not properly expressed in other documents, such as conference programmes. Here my answers to some very FAQs subsumed under: ‘How do I express the time correctly?’

Should I write am and pm, a.m. and p.m., A.M. and P.M., or AM and PM? Let me be quite honest: why does the concept of antemeridiem (am) and postmeridiem (pm) still exist? The prime reason is that, like degrees Fahrenheit and gallons amongst others, ‘am’ and ‘pm’ are still in standard use in the USA, and, whilst the British seem to have switched to degrees Celsius and the metric system in general (except for units of length and the indestructible ‘pint’), ‘am’ and ‘pm’ are still in use in the UK. They are also still used in a few other countries, notably Mexico—to my surprise, on a recent visit (I’m not sure about Canada). It is not because this is a practical way of expressing time in our context. I would do away with it tomorrow.

Why bother with digits **and** letters for time when four digits—with a bit of punctuation, if you want—do it all, especially when writing?

With or without full stops or periods, whether capitalised or not—all versions of ‘am’ and ‘pm’ given in the heading of this section are correct; you just have to be consistent within one text. My advice, however, is: never use ‘am’ and ‘pm’ in medical and scientific writing. If I have to use them, I prefer ‘am’ and ‘pm’. You may see the abbreviations ‘am.’ and ‘pm.’, but these are not acceptable; they are aberrations, like ‘eg.’ and ‘ie.’

Is there a space after the last digit of the time and the abbreviation ‘am’ or ‘pm’? 2.43 pm or 2.43pm? It doesn’t matter. Be consistent. I prefer a space (remember to use a non-breaking space: usually << control + shift + space-bar>> in Word), but note that many other writers seem to dispense with the space.

Do I need a leading zero? Not with ‘am’ and ‘pm’. Leading zeros are necessary only with the 24-hour clock (see ‘**How do I write the 24-hour clock**’ below) and look very strange with times using ‘am’ or ‘pm’.

Do I separate the digits used for the time with a full stop or a colon? It doesn’t matter, whether you are using ‘am’ and ‘pm’ or the 24-hour clock. Be consistent. But when using ‘am’ and ‘pm’, a full stop is more common. Never use a semi-colon or a hyphen.

Do I write 2.(:)00 pm or just 2 pm? It doesn’t matter: you either need the punctuation plus two zeros or nothing. Be consistent. Being consistent, however, means that if you have times other than whole ‘clock hours’ in your text (e.g. 2.30 pm), you should also write 2.00 pm. Whatever—when speaking, you just say: ‘two-pee-em’ or ‘two thirty pee-em’.

Is there a difference between the way I express the time when speaking and writing? Yes, there is a big difference. The way this is expressed is influenced by what you are doing, the time of day you are speaking, your language group, and by timetables. **See also the ‘Warning’ below.** When speaking, we usually use times in the context of a conversation, whether for business or pleasure. If you are speaking to a colleague about a meeting, you don’t usually say: ‘I’ll see you at sixteen hundred hours tomorrow’, because, when you say what is more usual: ‘I’ll see you at 4 (o’clock) tomorrow’, a business meeting is not normally expected to be at ‘four in the morning’. You might follow up your conversation with an Email and write: ‘I’ll meet you as agreed at 16(:)00 tomorrow’. You may, of course, be meeting a colleague at 04:00. If so, you would probably qualify the time with ‘in the morning’, and might prefer not to follow this up with an Email.

Times that might be confused (usually early morning or early evening), are generally qualified by saying ‘in the morning’ or ‘in the afternoon’ or ‘in the evening’ or sometimes by adding ‘ay-em’ or ‘pee-em’ when speaking. However, if you ask your colleague when her train is leaving for Milan, she may well say: ‘It leaves at sixteen forty-three’ and not at ‘four forty-three’ or ‘seventeen minutes to five’, although all are just as good as each other. These days in English, at least in Europe, people often speak of travel times using the 24-hour clock, especially if they are not round numbers. If you have flown in North America, you may have noticed it says ‘9.43A’ or ‘9.43P’ on your

1 Note the first ‘e’ (not an ‘i’) in ‘antemeridiem’, and both end in ‘-iem’ and not ‘-ian’. Depending on the dictionary you consult, both terms can also be written with a space after ‘ante’ and ‘post’.

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ticket. The 'A' and 'P' are the arbitrary abbreviations used by North American airlines (not only USA) for 'am' and 'pm' (wouldn't 09:43 and 21:43 be so much easier?), and resulted in my having to explain to a colleague here that they are not appropriate for our context 'just because the North Americans do it this way'.

What does 'o'clock mean', and is there a space after the apostrophe? This is the abbreviation for 'of the clock', and there is no space after the apostrophe. It should never be used in scientific or medical writing unless you are quoting verbatim, e.g.: 'I first noticed the rash at 10 o'clock in the evening'. 'o'clock' is used when speaking, using reported speech, or in literature.

How do I write the 24-hour clock? When I was a child travelling on the Continent in the 50s and 60s, this was 'one of the BIG differences' from Britain that added to the excitement—the 24-hour clock! But what a practical institution it is (and the British seem to have grasped this now): always four digits (you always need leading zeros) with a separator of your choice after the first two digits (or no separator if you prefer)—and you have it! No messy 'am' and 'pm'.

Incorrect	Correct
14:25 h, 14.25 h, 14:25 pm, 14:25 o'clock, 2 o'clock pm, 2 pm o'clock, 02.25 pm	14:25, 14.25 or 1425

Look at any train, air or other timetable and you will see that punctuation after the first two digits has largely been dropped (I suspect to save space and ink, but also because it is completely obvious that 'clock time' is the issue). It works, and everybody understands it. I haven't yet managed to jettison the colon in my writing. But what you **never** use when **writing** the 24-hour 'clock time' in English is any abbreviation or complete word for 'hours' afterwards, because this is incorrect. You may add 'hours' when speaking: 'fourteen hundred (hours)' for 14:00 or 'oh-two hundred (hours)' for 02:00 are perfectly acceptable, but sound rather military, or like 'Mission Impossible'.

So what does 14:25 h mean? It means a period lasting fourteen hours and twenty-five minutes, and not twenty-five minutes past two in the afternoon. The 'h' is the SI unit for hour, so by adding the 'h' you are actually expressing the **duration** of a period and not a 'clock time'. There is no need to write 14 h 25 min (not incorrect), but it is best to use the colon here to avoid confusion with the decimal point: is 14.25 h fourteen hours and fifteen minutes or fourteen hours and twenty-five minutes?

I digress: 'h' is the SI unit for time and **not** 'hr' (often still used by writers of US English). 'hr' should therefore never be used in scientific texts. Since SI units are never used in the plural, this also applies to 'hrs'. And while we are on this subject: 's' is the SI abbreviation for seconds, and not 'sec'. And—French speakers take note: 'min' is the SI abbreviation for minute' and not 'mn'.

What do 12:00 am and 12:00 pm mean? A prime example of a question that is a total waste of time in our context. Nobody will ever agree on this one—an utter lost cause. Use midday (or noon) and midnight when speaking, and you never have any problems.

If you have a list of sampling times in a study protocol, it will be clear from the context, e.g.: 'Blood samples will be taken at 8.00 am, 8.30 am, 9.00 am, 10.00 am, 11.00 am, 12.00 am, 1.00 pm, 5.00 pm, 9.00 pm, 12.00 pm, and 8.00 am'.

Anyone who says that they understand this to mean that there is a gap of 13 hours between 11.00 am and 12.00 am is being deliberately awkward (and we unfortunately all know someone who is so conspicuously awkward, who will probably also say that there is a gap of 15 hours between 9.00 pm and 12.00 pm!). In this case you may choose to acquiesce and write '12 midday' and '12 midnight'.

Which is correct: 00:00 or 24:00? Also a pointless question in our context. Don't even start to discuss it. It will be obvious from the context.

The list of times for the above example using the 24-hour clock would read: 08:00, 08:30, 09:00, 10:00, 11:00, 12:00, 13:00, 17:00, 21:00, 00.00 or 24:00, and 08.00.

Nothing for your conspicuously awkward colleague to seize upon here—except for the possible discussion of whether it should be 00:00 or 24:00. As I say—don't go there: just agree and be consistent.

What is 12 o'clock? Should never be used when writing in our context, except for verbatim quotes. Spoken, it means midday/noon or midnight and, when speaking, it should be clear from the context. If not, then say 'midday/noon' or 'midnight', 'twelve o'clock at night' or 'twelve o'clock in the morning'.

Warning: If a British person says to you 'I'll see you at half-seven', this means that they intend to meet you at 07:30 or 19:30 and **not** at 06:30 or 18:30. This is the colloquial way of saying 'at half-past seven'. It will usually be qualified by 'in the morning' or 'in the evening' if it is not clear. If an American says to you 'I'll see you at a quarter of ten', this means they intend to meet you at 09:45 or 21:45. This is not colloquial, and does not exist in British English. Also, the Americans will also often say 'a quarter after ten'. This is, of course, understood by British English speakers, but they say 'past' and not 'after'.

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Reference

1. Reeves A. Dating made easy... *TWS* 2006;15(1):25–6.