

To Round or Not to Round—That Is the Question

By Dianna Booher

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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210 words

*Dianna Booher works with organizations to increase their productivity and effectiveness through better oral, written, interpersonal, and cross-functional communication. She is a keynote speaker and the author of more than 40 books (22 on communication) including The Voice of Authority, Booher's Rules of Business Grammar, Speak with Confidence, and Communicate with Confidence. Dianna is CEO of **Booher Consultants**, a communication training firm offering programs in presentations skills, business writing, and interpersonal communication. Successful Meetings Magazine named her to its list of "21 Top Speakers for the 21st Century." Executive Excellence Publishing also named Dianna to its "Top 100 Thought Leaders" and "Top 100 Minds on Personal Development." www.booher.com or call 800.342.6621.*

For more on business writing, see E-Writing: 21st-Century Tools for Effective Communication (Simon & Schuster/Pocket Books) by Dianna Booher.

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