

1.1 Numbers and units

Objectives: to know that a physical quantity is a number and unit - to use prefixes to make units bigger or smaller - to understand scientific notation.



When you make a measurement, you might get a result like the one above: a distance of 10 m. The complete measurement is called a **physical quantity**. It is made up of two parts: a number and a unit.

10 m really means $10 \times \text{m}$ (ten times metre), just as in algebra, $10x$ means $10 \times x$ (ten times x). You can treat the m just like a symbol in an algebraic equation. This is important when combining units.



Advanced units

5 m/s is a space-saving way of writing $5 \frac{\text{m}}{\text{s}}$.

But $5 \frac{\text{m}}{\text{s}}$ equals $5 \text{ m} \frac{1}{\text{s}}$.

Also, $\frac{1}{\text{s}}$ can be written as s^{-1} .

So the speed can be written as 5 m s^{-1} .

This method of showing units is more common in advanced work.

Combining units

In the diagram above, the girl cycles 10 metres in 2 s. So she travels 5 metres every second. Her *speed* is 5 metres per second. To work out the speed, you divide the distance travelled by the time taken, like this:

$$\text{speed} = \frac{10 \text{ m}}{2 \text{ s}} \quad (\text{s is the symbol for second})$$

As m and s can be treated as algebraic symbols:

$$\text{speed} = \frac{10}{2} \cdot \frac{\text{m}}{\text{s}} = 5 \frac{\text{m}}{\text{s}}$$

To save space, $5 \frac{\text{m}}{\text{s}}$ is usually written as 5m/s.

So m/s is the unit of speed.



Tables and graphs

You may see table headings or graph axes labelled like this:

distance
m or distance/m

That is because the values shown are just numbers, without units. So:

If $\text{distance} = 10 \text{ m}$

Then $\frac{\text{distance}}{\text{m}} = 10$

Rights and wrongs

This equation is correct: $\text{speed} = \frac{10 \text{ m}}{2 \text{ s}} = 5 \text{ m/s}$

This equation is incorrect: $\text{speed} = \frac{10}{2} = 5 \text{ m/s}$

It is incorrect because the m and s have been left out. 10 divided by 2 equals 5, and not 5 m/s.

Strictly speaking, units should be included at *all* stages of a calculation, not just at the end. However, in this book, the 'incorrect' type of equation will sometimes be used so that you can follow the arithmetic without units which make the calculation look more complicated.

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 - The Rise of Digital Reading Read Ndimma Ma Ch1 3
 - Advantages of eBooks Over Traditional Books
2. Identifying Read Ndimma Ma Ch1 3
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 - Considering Fiction vs. Non-Fiction
 - Determining Your Reading Goals
3. Choosing the Right eBook Platform
 - Popular eBook Platforms
 - Features to Look for in an Read Ndimma Ma Ch1 3
 - User-Friendly Interface
4. Exploring eBook Recommendations from Read Ndimma Ma Ch1 3
 - Personalized Recommendations
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 - Dealing with Digital Eye Strain
 - Minimizing Distractions
 - Managing Screen Time
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 - Carving Out Dedicated Reading Time
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