

DESIGN NOTES

Feedback and Comments on “Where Have the Spaces Gone?”

We received many reader comments about last issue’s column on the proper format for numbers and units. Here are excerpts from some of your e-mails, along with follow-up notes of our own.

Editor,

Thank you for your design note on spaces. I have fallen victim to leaving out the spaces. But I checked the official SI standard once again, and I find that paragraph 5.3.3 specifies that spaces are to be used:

http://www.bipm.org/utis/common/pdf/si_brochure_8_en.pdf

Thank you for the fine magazine.

Steven Swift
Novatech Instruments, Inc.

Editor,

Ref. High Frequency Electronics Design Notes, May 2009. Two online manuals I find quite helpful in technical writing are:

U.S. Government Printing Office Style Manual
<http://www.gpoaccess.gov/stylemanual/browse.html>

IEEE Standards Style Manual
<http://standards.ieee.org/guides/style/>

Dave Bowker
Fort Kent, ME

Editor,

Your Editorial/Design Notes on “Where Have the Spaces Gone?” resonated with me as an aesthete when it comes to the written word. Your specific question of when did the practice of removing spaces between numbers and units become common practice speculated that there was some reason for the change, but you could not find it. Let me offer a possibility based on my own observations. With the shift to self editing of documents (e.g., conference papers, web pages, etc.), those that do the writing do not know what the rules are, and since there is no editor to make the changes necessary, mistakes start to propagate.

I have noticed this with students when I review their papers and theses. When asked why they make these mistakes, they say they looked at previous stu-

dents’ work or conference papers. Unfortunately, they look at the wrong examples. So, I take it upon myself to get out the red pen and bleed all over their drafts until they get it right. They remember this and get it right from then on.

Sven G. Bilén, Ph.D., P.E.
Chief Technologist, Center for Space Research Programs
The Pennsylvania State University

Editor,

I suspect the missing spaces between numerals and units are caused by two things:

1. Writers don’t know how to insert a “non-breaking space” in their word processors. Use of a regular space can result in numerals and units on different lines of text (another writing no-no that is frequently ignored, even in prestigious refereed journals).

2. With no space, there is no need to hyphenate adjectival uses (e.g., “5-V source” [correct] as opposed to “5 V source” [incorrect]).

I grade dozens of project reports from undergraduate EE students every semester. Whenever I think I’ve seen every possible grammatical and style error, one of my students invents a new one. It is far, far easier to ignore the rules of grammar and style than to try to teach them.

Prof. David M. Drury
University of Wisconsin–Platteville

Editor’s Comments

David, thanks for mentioning the nonbreaking space, which is the key to keeping numbers and units together as the text wraps to the next line. In MS Word, use the command CTRL-SHIFT-SPACE, or look up the proper action in other programs.

I also apologize to grammatical experts everywhere for all the little errors we make while preparing a wide variety of material for each issue. For example, I know we miss a lot of those pesky hyphenated modifiers in our magazine! While “5-V source” is grammatically correct, it is very easy—even for professional editors—to look past them when the context is perfectly clear.

Finally, we still have not found any style guide that recommends the no-space usage. Any help to identify the origin of this practice and satisfy our curiosity would be appreciated!

—Gary Breed