

Our classroom experiment: Results

After throwing away obvious mistakes in reading the scale, we had:

Value	# students
1.60	1
1.61	2
1.62	11
1.63	3
1.65	2

Overall average

1.62

The first two digits did not vary;
they are CERTAIN.

The last digit varied; it is
UNCERTAIN.

When reading measurements from a scale, record all CERTAIN digits and one UNCERTAIN (or estimated) digit.

Significant figures


SIGNIFICANT FIGURES are a way to indicate the amount of uncertainty in a measurement.

The significant figures in a measurement are all of the CERTAIN DIGITS plus one and only one UNCERTAIN (or estimated) DIGIT

Example:

From our classroom experiment

1.62 cm



We estimated the last digit, It's uncertain

These digits were obtained in all measurements. They are certain

THIS MEASUREMENT HAS "THREE SIGNIFICANT FIGURES"!

Determining significant figures

When you read a measurement that someone has written using the significant figures convention, you can tell how precisely that measurement was made.

1.473 g

This was measured to the nearest ± 0.001 g
The last digit is always UNCERTAIN (or estimated)

21 m ± 1

37.26 kg ± 0.01

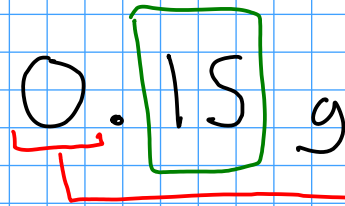
A small problem

The number ZERO has several uses. It may be a measured number, but it may also be a mere "placeholder" that wasn't measured at all!

So how do we tell a measured zero from a placeholder? There are a few ways:

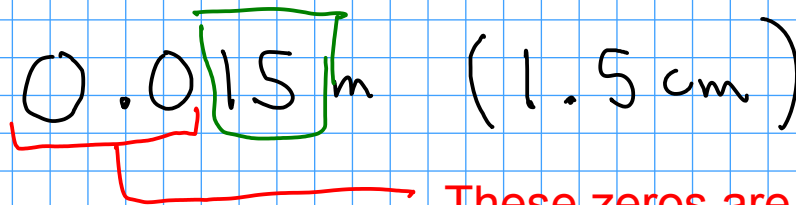
1: BEGINNING ZEROS: Beginning zeros are NEVER considered significant.

0.15 g



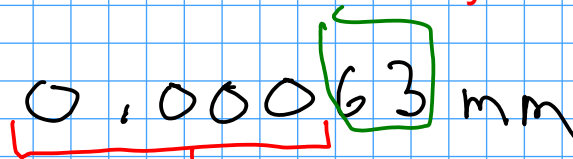
This zero merely indicates that there is a decimal point coming up!

0.015 m (1.5 cm)



These zeros are placeholders. They'll disappear if you change the UNITS of this number!

0,00063 mm



None of these zeros are considered significant

2: END ZEROS are sometimes considered significant. They are significant if

- there is a WRITTEN decimal point in the number
- there is another written indicator that the zero is significant. Usually this is a line drawn over or under the last zero that is significant!

1.50 km

This zero IS considered significant. There's a written decimal.

1500 m

These zeros ARE NOT considered significant (no written decimal, and no other indication that the zeros are significant)

143000 g

These zeros are not significant.

This zero IS significant. It's marked.

How many significant figures are there in each of these measurements?

5
76.070 g \neq ,001

5
85000. mm
↑

4
0.001030 kg

7
156.0002 g

2
0.10 s

2
17000000 mg

4
120000 km

3
1350 ms

Calculations with measurements

When you calculate something using measured numbers., you should try to make sure the ANSWER reflects the quality of the data used to make the calculation.

An ANSWER is only as good as the POOREST measurement that went into finding that answer!

$$\begin{array}{r} 14.206 \\ 154.72 \\ + 1.6 \\ + 0.222 \\ \hline 170.748 \end{array}$$

170.7

How should we report this answer? How much uncertainty is in this answer?

If you add an uncertain number to either a certain or an uncertain number, then the result is uncertain!

If you add certain numbers together, the result is certain!