2 Standard form and prefixes

When describing the structure of the Universe you have to use very large numbers. There are billions of galaxies and their average separation is about a million light years (ly). The Big Bang theory says that the Universe began expanding about 14 billion years ago. The Sun formed about 5 billion years ago. These numbers and larger numbers can be expressed in standard form and by using prefixes.

2.1 Standard form for large numbers

In standard form, the number is written with one digit in front of the decimal point and multiplied by the appropriate power of 10. For example:

- The diameter of the Earth, for example, is 13 000 km.
  13 000 km = 1.3 × 10 000 km = 1.3×10^4 km.
- The distance to the Andromeda galaxy is 2 200 000 light years = 2.2 × 1 000 000 ly = 2.2×10^6 ly.

2.2 Prefixes for large numbers

Prefixes are used with SI units (see Topic 1.1) when the value is very large or very small. They can be used instead of writing the number in standard form. For example:

- A kilowatt (1 kW) is a thousand watts, that is 1000 W or 10^3 W.
- A megawatt (1 MW) is a million watts, that is 1 000 000 W or 10^6 W.
- A gigawatt (1 GW) is a billion watts, that is 1 000 000 000 W or 10^9 W.

Prefix	Symbol	Value
kilo	k	10^3
mega	M	10^6

Prefix	Symbol	Value
giga	G	10^9
tera	T	10^{12}

For example, Gansu Wind Farm in China has an output of 6.8×10^9 W. This can be written as 6800 MW or 6.8 GW.

Practice questions

1 Give these measurements in standard form:

a 1350 W **b** 130 000 Pa **c** 696 × 10^6 s **d** 0.176 × 10^{12} C kg^{-1}

2 The latent heat of vaporisation of water is 2 260 000 J/kg. Write this in:

a J/g **b** kJ/kg **c** MJ/kg

2.3 Standard form and prefixes for small numbers

At the other end of the scale, the diameter of an atom is about a tenth of a billionth of a metre. The particles that make up an atomic nucleus are much smaller. These measurements are represented using negative powers of ten and more prefixes. For example:

- The charge on an electron = 1.6×10^{-19} C.
- The mass of a neutron = 0.016 75 × 10^{-25} kg = 1.675×10^{-27} kg (the decimal point has moved 2 places to the right).

- There are a billion nanometres in a metre, that is 1 000 000 000 nm = 1 m.
- There are a million micrometres in a metre, that is 1 000 000 μm = 1 m.

Prefix	Symbol	Value
centi	c	10^{-2}
milli	m	10^{-3}
micro	μ	10^{-6}

Prefix	Symbol	Value
nano	n	10^{-9}
pico	p	10^{-12}
femto	f	10^{-15}

Practice questions

3 Give these measurements in standard form:
a 0.0025 m **b** 160×10^{-17} m **c** 0.01×10^{-6} J **d** 0.005×10^{6} m **e** 0.00062×10^{3} N

4 Write the measurements for question 3a, c, and d above using suitable prefixes.

5 Write the following measurements using suitable prefixes.
a a microwave wavelength = 0.009 m
b a wavelength of infrared = 1×10^{-5} m
c a wavelength of blue light = 4.7×10^{-7} m

2.4 Powers of ten

When multiplying powers of ten, you must *add* the indices.

So 100 × 1000 = 100 000 is the same as $10^2 \times 10^3 = 10^{2+3} = 10^5$

When dividing powers of ten, you must *subtract* the indices.

So $\frac{100}{1000} = \frac{1}{10} = 10^{-1}$ is the same as $\frac{10^2}{10^3} = 10^{2-3} = 10^{-1}$

But you can only do this when the numbers with the indices are the same.

So $10^2 \times 2^3 = 100 \times 8 = 800$

And you can’t do this when adding or subtracting.

$10^2 + 10^3 = 100 + 1000 = 1100$

$10^2 - 10^3 = 100 - 1000 = -900$

Remember: You can only add and subtract the indices when you are multiplying or dividing the numbers, not adding or subtracting them.

Practice questions

6 Calculate the following values – read the questions very carefully!
a $20^6 + 10^{-3}$
b $10^2 - 10^{-2}$
c $2^3 \times 10^2$
d $10^5 \div 10^2$

7 The speed of light is 3.0×10^8 m s^{-1}. Use the equation $v = f\lambda$ (where λ is wavelength) to calculate the frequency of:

a ultraviolet, wavelength 3.0×10^{-7} m
b radio waves, wavelength 1000 m
c X-rays, wavelength 1.0×10^{-10} m.