

# Lesson 1: The Metric System

Ask someone how tall they are and they'll probably tell you in feet and inches.

- This is surprising given that we are a metric country, but it is a traditional way of describing peoples' heights that has stayed with us.
- So why did we switch over to the metric system?

## Did You Know?

The original "foot" was actually defined as the size of the current king's foot! There is evidence that the "yard" was the distance from the nose of King Henry I to his extended fingertip.



*Illustration 1: The official "metrication" logo used in Canada in the 70's & 80's.*

The metric system started a couple hundred years ago in France.

- It was called "**Le Système International d'Unités**" which is why you sometimes hear it referred to as the **SI** system.
- It grew out of the need to have a standard system that everyone could agree on.
- In 1970 the Canadian government started the "metrication" of Canada. By the early 1980's the majority of Canadian measurements were metric.
- There are three core measurements to the metric system: **length**, **mass**, and **time**.

## Length

The standard unit of **length** is the **metre**.

- Notice that it is spelled "metre", not "meter".
  - Many textbooks published in the United States use the "Americanized" spelling with an "er" on the end.
- Originally the distance from the North Pole to the equator divided into little pieces was used as the standard for the metre.
- Then it was switched to a platinum-iridium rod kept at 0°C at the International Bureau of Weights and Measures in Sèvres, France.
- Since even this rod could alter in size over time, we now use the distance that a beam of light will travel in  $3.34 \times 10^{-9}$  s.

## Mass

The standard unit of **mass** is the **kilogram**.

- At one time the kilogram was actually defined as the mass of a particular amount of water.
- It is now based on a platinum-iridium cylinder kept in Sèvres, France.

## Time

The standard unit of **time** is the **second**.

- When the SI system was first created, they defined the second based on how long it took the earth to spin once on its axis! 1 day = 86 400 s.
  - It was felt that this was too inaccurate.

## For more information...

...about atomic clocks, and to get the current time, you can visit the [U.S. Naval Observatory's Website](#) or the [Official U.S. Time Website](#). Take a "Walk Through Time" at the NIST.

- We now use the decay rate of radioactive isotopes like cesium in [atomic clocks](#) to measure time.
- The world bases time on UTC (Universal Coordinated Time).
  - In Alberta we are on Mountain Time
    - UTC -6:00 during Daylight Savings Time
    - UTC -7:00 during the rest of the year
- If you have a shortwave radio, tune in 5000 Hz, 10 000 Hz, or 20 000 Hz to hear the time.

## Derived Units

At times we will use **derived units**. These derived units are a way of shortening up the amount of units you have to write down after an number.

You already used these in Science 10, like Joules, the unit of energy.

- From a basic formula like  $E_p = mgh$  the units for Joules should be  $\text{kgm}^2/\text{s}^2$ .
- Instead, we say that the whole thing is equal to the Joule (J). Not only do we get to do less writing, we also get to honour some famous physicists.
- The Joule is derived from the **base units** of the metric system.

**Base unit** is just another name for standard units. These are units in the metric system (like metres, kilograms, and seconds) that can't be broken down to simpler units.

It's just like making something out of Lego blocks. You can arrange the Lego blocks in different ways to derive something different, but it's always made up of the base pieces.

## Metric Prefixes

In order to make numbers more "friendly" looking, the metric system sometimes uses **prefixes** in the front of the base units.

- Measuring the distance from Edmonton to Calgary in metres would be silly. Instead we measure it in **kilometres**.
- Measuring the size of an atom in metres would be just as bad, so we might use **picometres**.
- On the back of your data sheet, you'll find a list of the common metric prefixes... notice that "kilo" is 1000 or  $10^3$ .
  - You don't need to memorize these since you'll always have a copy of the data sheet handy.
  - Later in this unit when we study scientific notation you'll see another alternative that we have.
  - Avoid mixing scientific notation with metric prefixes... it's not considered "polite."
- It is very important to always change everything into the most basic units (like metres instead of kilometres) before doing any calculations, since almost all the formulas are based on units without prefixes.