Is 07 04 2007 the fourth of July?

Pat Naughtin

For years, people have used random arrangements for saying and writing dates. Usually this hasn't mattered much, because writing dates has rarely impinged on our relationships with other nations. However, as we become more computerised (personally), more multicultural (nationally), and more multinational (globally), date formats have assumed more importance.

Most Australians write the date as day, month, year (dd mm yyyy); conversely, in the USA, they tend to write month, day, year (mm dd yyyy). In dealings between Australia and the USA, this can lead to all sorts of confusions and complications; does the date 07 04 2002 refer to the seventh of April or to Independence Day in the USA. Writers and editors must take ultimate responsibility for any errors, inconvenience, and additional costs arising out of the use of old ad hoc date formats.

Some people avoid all-numeric dates altogether, by using number and letter combinations: 4 July 2002 or 7 apr 2002. Dates written this way are less compact, and the technique destroys the multilingual nature of fully numerical dates.

I believe that the yyyy mm dd order, going from big to small, is the natural way to write dates. My reasoning is that we almost always use a descending unit size order when we combine a number of different unit sizes of the same quantity. For example, when we write a price, we start with dollars and then go to cents i.e. from big to small, as in $12.34 where 12 dollars is larger in value than 34 cents.

And when you measure your kitchen for new floor covering you measure (say) 2345 mm by 1840 mm, and then change to metres to order your material (2.345 x 1.890 = 4.432 square metres). Again, you write from big (metres) to small (millimetres). We've always done this. Consider the same kitchen floor using the (fortunately now almost obsolete) yards, feet, inches and fractions of an inch. In this case the floor would be 2 yds (big) 1 ft. 6 5/16 in. (small) by 2 yds 0 ft 2 13/32 in. I will leave the calculation of this floor area to others!

Indeed, our very numbering system uses the same order of big to small. Consider the number 543; the 5 hundreds (big), come before the 4 tens, and the 3 units (small) are last.

Once you adopt the numerical descending method for writing dates you make some interesting discoveries. The yyyy mm dd format:

◊ is preferable for sorting, filing and retrieving documents in date sequence. This is especially useful with computer files.

◊ makes calculations of elapsed time very much easier, especially for date calculations such as those used for the amount of interest on an investment.

◊ combines rationally with hh mm sss of time when you need more precision.

You will also discover that you are not the first to use the yyyy mm dd format For example, astronomers have used this date format for a very long time and the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) has a world standard (ISO 8601:2000) for writing dates using this format. Most of the world's nations also have a similar standard; for example, Australia has Australian Standard AS 3802:1997, Canada has CSA/CAN3 Z234.4

(and a Federal Identity Manual, which refers to this standard for writing the date and time in government documents) and the USA has ANSI X3.30.

So why do we cling – often fiercely – to strange randomly selected date formats of the past? Perhaps the main reason is that the way we write dates is not the same as the way we say dates. People say the date in different ways; you might say the seventh of April (dd-mm) and your correspondent from the USA might say April the seventh (mm-dd).

In future, I am confidant that dates will be written in the rational yyyy mm dd format for all purposes; especially for formal, contractual and government writing. We will continue to use a range of ways of saying the date, but we will gradually change to writing it in a rational way.

There are four combining pressures that cause me to make this claim. Firstly, the yyyy-mm-dd format is a self-specifying format because yyyy-dd-mm is not used anywhere in the world. If I refer to 1964-04-08, there is no doubt to which date I am referring; when you specify the date with the year first, you are automatically specifying yyyy-mm-dd. Secondly, it is preferable for sorting, filing and retrieving documents in computer files. Thirdly, our relationships, both nationally and personally, demand that we avoid language specific writing that excludes people from our audience. And fourthly, the very existence of ISO 8601:2000 and its recognition by individual nations ensures its gradual acceptance globally.

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