



## Writer's Camp



## False Precision

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*Wordcraft at Camp* offers bite-size lessons on language, clarity, and scholarly style from the counselors at Writer's Camp.

## Quick Definition

False precision occurs when numbers are reported with unnecessary or inconsistent decimal places, creating the illusion of accuracy without adding meaning.

## In Practice

Authors sometimes report results like this: 8%, 8.2%, and 8.25%. Or “The correlation between study hours and exam scores was...  $r = .4$ ; or  $r = .42$ ; or  $r = .4237$ .”

When values drawn from the same dataset or analytic method are presented with different numbers of decimal places, they imply different levels of measurement precision or certainty—even when none exist. To a careful reader, this signals inconsistency rather than rigor.

Even when authors believe they are being precise, inconsistent decimal places can distract readers or raise questions about how the data were analyzed. Were these values rounded differently? Do they come from separate analyses? Or is the inconsistency simply accidental? When readers pause to wonder, the writing has lost momentum.

In most narrative contexts, whole-number percentages convey findings clearly. Additional decimal places rarely change interpretation and may overstate the accuracy of the data. For the Pearson product moment correlation ( $r$ ) shown above, .42 is the best presentation. Two decimal places communicate the strength clearly without **false precision**.

## Common Pitfalls

- Mixing levels of numeric precision within the same paragraph, table, or figure.
- Adding decimal places “just in case” or to appear more scientific.
- Relying on software defaults without editorial review.
- Reporting more precision than the data can reasonably support.
- Assuming readers equate more digits with better science.

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## Rule of Thumb

Choose a single level of precision and use it consistently. For percentages in narrative text, whole numbers are usually sufficient unless decimals meaningfully affect interpretation. If decimal places are necessary, apply the same level of precision consistently across all related values.

*Precision is not about adding digits;  
it's about matching numbers to meaning.*

— WORDCRAFT AT CAMP



## Counselor's Tip



Precision is a communication decision, not a technical flourish. Extra decimal places often signal anxiety, not rigor. When in doubt, choose clarity and consistency over unnecessary detail.

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**WHEN REPORTING METHODS, ACCURATE LANGUAGE MATTERS**

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