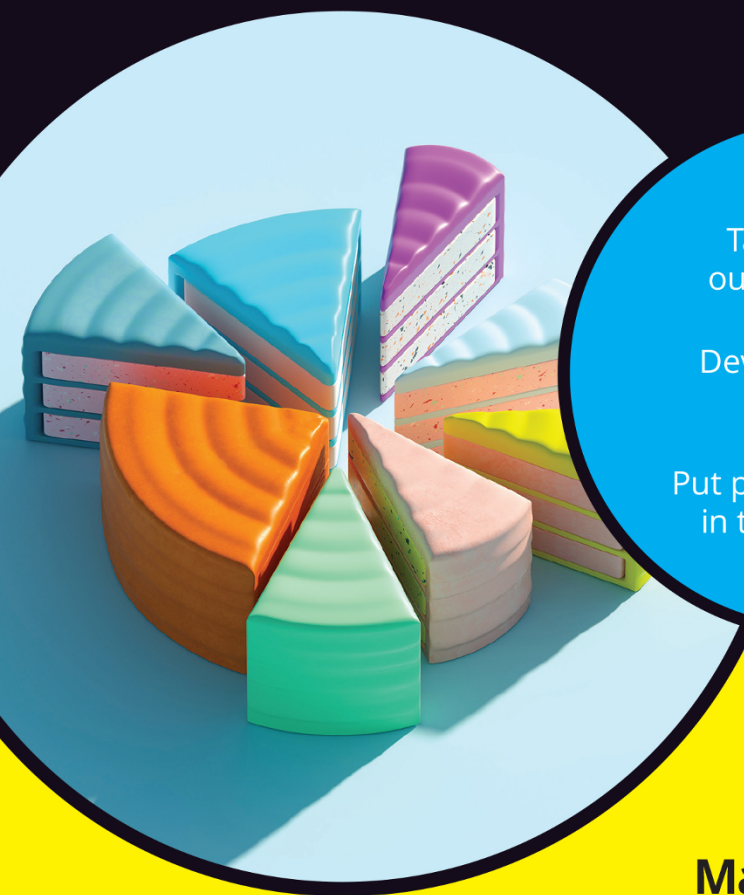


LEARNING MADE EASY



# Fractions

for  
**dummies**<sup>®</sup>  
A Wiley Brand



Take the fear  
out of fractions

—  
Develop decimal  
expertise

—  
Put percents to work  
in the real world

**Mark Zegarelli**

Math Tutor





# Fractions

by Mark Zegarelli

<sup>for</sup>  
**dummies**<sup>®</sup>  
A Wiley Brand

# Fractions For Dummies®

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# Table of Contents

<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	1
About This Book	1
Foolish Assumptions	2
Icons Used in This Book	3
Beyond the Book	3
Where to Go from Here	4
 <b>PART 1: AN OVERVIEW OF FRACTIONS, DECIMALS, AND PERCENTS</b>	 5
<b>CHAPTER 1: What Are Fractions, Decimals, and Percents?</b>	7
Taking a First Look at Fractions	8
Understanding how fractions work	8
Making sense of equivalent fractions	9
Understanding improper fractions	10
Seeing how improper fractions and mixed numbers relate	10
Seeing Why Decimals Are So User-Friendly	11
Understanding decimals that have one decimal place	12
Understanding decimals that have two decimal places	13
Understanding fraction-decimal equivalence	14
Putting Percents into Perspective	15
Making sense of percents	16
Converting percents to decimals and fractions	17
 <b>CHAPTER 2: Boosting Basic Skills</b>	 19
Knowing Basic Math Words	20
Knowing a number from a numeral	20
Getting your digits sorted	20
Finding values in numbers	21
Counting on integers	21
Examining mathematical operations	22
Talking the talk for the basic four operations	23
Knowing the Basics of Number Sets	24
Describing sets of numbers	24
Integers	25
Rational numbers	25
Irrational numbers	26
Real numbers	26

Reviewing Place Value in Whole Numbers . . . . .	27
Putting values in their place. . . . .	28
Looking at leading and placeholding zeros . . . . .	28
Making Sense of Integer Division . . . . .	29
Getting a remainder with division. . . . .	30
Following the cycle of remainders . . . . .	30
<b>CHAPTER 3: Understanding Factors and Multiples. . . . .</b>	<b>33</b>
Understanding Divisibility . . . . .	34
Making sense of divisibility. . . . .	34
Knowing some divisibility tricks. . . . .	35
Finding Factors and Multiples . . . . .	40
Identifying factors . . . . .	40
Making sense of multiples . . . . .	47
Relating factors and multiples . . . . .	47
Going Big with the Greatest Common Factor . . . . .	48
Finding common factors. . . . .	48
Identifying the GCF . . . . .	49
Tricks to help you find the GCF . . . . .	50
Playing Small with the Least Common Multiple . . . . .	51
Finding the LCM. . . . .	51
Tricks for calculating the LCM . . . . .	51
<b>PART 2: FRACTIONS . . . . .</b>	<b>55</b>
<b>CHAPTER 4: Figuring Fractions . . . . .</b>	<b>57</b>
Visualizing Fractions . . . . .	58
Using divided circles to represent parts of the whole . . . . .	58
Working with fractions on the number line. . . . .	60
Understanding Basic Fraction Terminology . . . . .	62
Numerators and denominators . . . . .	62
Proper and improper fractions . . . . .	62
Representing whole numbers as fractions . . . . .	63
Understanding why a zero denominator is undefined . . . . .	63
Fractions and their reciprocals . . . . .	64
Understanding Equivalent Fractions . . . . .	65
Using models to understand equivalent fractions . . . . .	65
Changing a fraction to an equivalent form . . . . .	68
Working with Improper Fractions and Mixed Numbers . . . . .	73
Figuring out improper fractions . . . . .	73
Mixing it up with mixed numbers . . . . .	75

Changing mixed numbers to improper fractions by using Popcorn.....	78
Changing improper fractions to mixed numbers.....	79
Comparing Fractions' Values.....	82
Comparing fractions that have the same denominator.....	82
Comparing fractions by finding a common denominator.....	83
<b>CHAPTER 5: Adding and Subtracting Fractions.....</b>	<b>89</b>
Adding and Subtracting Fractions that Have a Common Denominator.....	90
Adding fractions that have a common denominator.....	90
Subtracting fractions that have a common denominator.....	94
Adding and subtracting three or more fractions.....	96
Adding and Subtracting Fractions that Have Different Denominators.....	97
Adding and subtracting two fractions by increasing terms.....	98
Adding and subtracting two fractions by cross-multiplying.....	101
Solving Bigger Problems That Have Different Denominators.....	104
Breaking a big problem into steps.....	104
Finding a common denominator for more than two fractions.....	105
<b>CHAPTER 6: Multiplying and Dividing Fractions.....</b>	<b>107</b>
Multiplying Fractions.....	107
Multiplying a pair of fractions.....	108
Multiplying more than two fractions.....	108
Canceling factors to make multiplication easier.....	109
Dividing Fractions.....	112
Using Keep-Change-Flip to turn division into multiplication.....	112
Canceling factors after Keep-Change-Flip.....	113
Converting results of division from improper fractions to mixed numbers.....	114
<b>CHAPTER 7: Working with Mixed Numbers.....</b>	<b>117</b>
Adding Mixed Numbers.....	118
Adding mixed numbers that have a common denominator.....	118
Adding a pair of mixed numbers that have different denominators.....	120
Adding a pair of mixed numbers when carrying is required.....	123
Subtracting Mixed Numbers.....	126
Subtracting mixed numbers that have a common denominator.....	126

Subtracting a pair of mixed numbers that have different denominators . . . . .	128
Subtracting mixed numbers when borrowing is required. . . . .	130
Multiplying Mixed Numbers . . . . .	134
Multiplying a pair of mixed numbers . . . . .	135
Canceling factors to make multiplying mixed numbers easier . . . . .	135
Dividing Mixed Numbers . . . . .	136
Dividing a pair of mixed numbers. . . . .	137
Canceling factors to make dividing mixed numbers easier . . . . .	138

**CHAPTER 8: Word Problems with Fractions . . . . . 141**

Solving Word Problems by Adding and Subtracting Fractions . . .	142
Putting the pieces together: Adding fractions. . . . .	142
Finding the difference: Subtracting fractions . . . . .	144
Figuring out what's left over. . . . .	146
Multiplying Fractions to Solve Word Problems. . . . .	147
Multiplying a fraction by a whole number . . . . .	147
Multiplying a pair of fractions . . . . .	148
Using multiplication to translate the word <i>of</i> . . . . .	149
Handling problems that have multiple steps, including multiplication . . . . .	150
Solving Word Problems by Dividing Fractions . . . . .	151
Dividing a fraction by a whole number . . . . .	151
Dividing a fraction by a fraction. . . . .	152
Solving Word Problems by Using Ratios . . . . .	153
Ratios that have two values . . . . .	154
Ratios that have more than two values . . . . .	155
Ratios that include the total value. . . . .	156
Using Proportional Equations to Solve Word Problems . . . . .	157
Building proportional equations . . . . .	157
Using the total value in a proportional equation . . . . .	158

**PART 3: DECIMALS . . . . . 165**

**CHAPTER 9: Deciphering Decimals . . . . . 167**

Making Cents of Decimals by Using Money . . . . .	168
Understanding Decimals by Using Visual Aids . . . . .	169
Seeing decimals as divided circles . . . . .	169
Working with decimals on the number line. . . . .	170



Seeing the Value in Decimal Place Value . . . . .	170
Multiplying and Dividing by Moving the Decimal Point. . . . .	172
Multiplying decimals by 10, 100, 1,000, and beyond . . . . .	173
Dividing decimals by 10, 100, 1,000, and more. . . . .	173
Converting Between Decimals and Fractions . . . . .	174
Working with common decimal-fraction conversions . . . . .	174
Changing decimals less than 1 to fractions . . . . .	175
Changing decimals greater than 1 to fractions. . . . .	177
Changing a fraction to a terminating decimal. . . . .	178
Changing a fraction to a repeating decimal. . . . .	179
<b>CHAPTER 10: Applying the Basic Four Operations to Decimals. . . . .</b>	<b>183</b>
Adding Decimals . . . . .	183
Subtracting Decimals . . . . .	185
Multiplying Decimals . . . . .	188
Dividing Decimals . . . . .	190
Adding trailing zeros when needed . . . . .	191
Dealing with repeating decimal quotients. . . . .	193
<b>CHAPTER 11: Word Problems with Decimals. . . . .</b>	<b>197</b>
Solving Word Problems by Adding and Subtracting Decimals . . .	198
Adding things up with decimals. . . . .	198
Using decimals to find the difference. . . . .	198
Calculating what's left over with decimals . . . . .	199
Combining addition and subtraction to solve decimal word problems. . . . .	199
Multiplying Decimals to Solve Word Problems. . . . .	201
Multiplying by 10 and powers of 10 . . . . .	201
Multiplying by other numbers. . . . .	202
Multiplying decimals to find area . . . . .	202
Solving multi-step word problems that involve decimal multiplication. . . . .	203
Solving Word Problems that Involve Decimal Division . . . . .	204
Dividing by 10 and powers of 10. . . . .	205
Dividing by other numbers. . . . .	205
Dividing decimals by other decimals . . . . .	206
Dividing decimals to solve area problems. . . . .	206
Solving multi-step word problems that involve decimal division . . . . .	207

<b>PART 4: PERCENTS</b> .....	211
<b>CHAPTER 12: Probing Percents</b> .....	213
Understanding Percentages .....	214
Calculating Common Percents in Your Head .....	216
Calculating 100%, 200%, and 50% .....	216
Calculating 10%, 20%, and 5% .....	216
Calculating 25% and 75% .....	217
Switching Around Numbers to Calculate Percents .....	218
Changing Percents to Decimals, and Vice Versa .....	219
Converting decimals to percents .....	219
Converting percents to decimals .....	220
Converting Between Percents and Fractions .....	221
Changing fractions to percents .....	221
Changing percents to fractions .....	222
<b>CHAPTER 13: Solving Percentage Problems</b> .....	227
Calculating Percents .....	228
Meeting Three Types of Percentage Problems .....	228
Solving Percentage Problems by Building Equations .....	230
Using an equation to find the starting number .....	230
Using an equation to find the percentage value .....	232
<b>CHAPTER 14: Word Problems with Percents</b> .....	235
Solving Straightforward Percentage Word Problems .....	236
Solving More Difficult Percentage Word Problems .....	237
Finding the starting value .....	237
Calculating the percentage value .....	238
Working Simple Problems That Involve Percent Increase and Decrease .....	239
Calculating percent increase .....	240
Calculating percent decrease .....	240
Solving Tricky Percent Increase and Decrease Word Problems .....	242
Finding the starting value .....	242
Finding the percentage value .....	244
<b>PART 5: THE PART OF TENS</b> .....	249
<b>CHAPTER 15: Ten Important Points for Working with Fractions</b> .....	251
Simplifying Fractions .....	251
Increasing the Terms of Fractions .....	252

Changing Mixed Numbers to Improper Fractions . . . . .	253
Knowing When to Find a Common Denominator . . . . .	254
Knowing When You Don't Need a Common Denominator . . . . .	255
Canceling Factors Before Multiplying Fractions . . . . .	255
Using Keep-Change-Flip Only When Dividing Fractions . . . . .	256
Using Keep-Change-Flip Before Canceling Factors . . . . .	257
When to Change Mixed Numbers to Improper Fractions . . . . .	257
When Not to Change Mixed Numbers to Improper Fractions . . . . .	258
<b>CHAPTER 16: Ten Real-World Uses for Fractions . . . . .</b>	<b>261</b>
Cooking and Baking . . . . .	261
Construction and Building . . . . .	262
Money and Finance . . . . .	263
Sports . . . . .	264
Telling Time . . . . .	264
Music and Visual Art . . . . .	265
Gambling . . . . .	265
Nursing and Medicine . . . . .	266
Health and Fitness . . . . .	266
Travel and Fuel Efficiency . . . . .	267
<b>INDEX . . . . .</b>	<b>269</b>



# Introduction

**A**s a math teacher and tutor, I hear a lot about how many students find working with fractions difficult. So, I'm really glad that in this book, *Fractions For Dummies*, I have an opportunity to focus solely on fractions, fractions, and more fractions — not to mention the closely related topics of decimals and percentages.

I've done my best to take a really slow and steady approach to fractions. Part 1 of this book is entirely devoted to an overview of fractions, followed by a foundation of basic math skills to support you.

In Part 2, you can find five full chapters devoted solely to the most important core of fractions skills. Simplifying fractions, finding a common denominator, converting between improper fractions and mixed numbers, as well as adding, subtracting, multiplying, and dividing fractions — it's all there!

After that, Parts 3 and 4 cover decimals and percentages. And at the end, just for fun, Part 5 gives you two top-ten lists about fractions that you may find useful.

## About This Book

This book provides clear instruction related to working with fractions and the associated topics of decimals and percentages. Each chapter contains multiple sections, each providing

- » **A clear explanation** of the topic under focus
- » **A variety of example problems**, each with a step-by-step solution
- » **Practice problems**, with solutions at the end of the section

I introduce the topics in an order that I believe can guide you to the best understanding of fractions, decimals, and percentages. But don't feel under any obligation to follow that path from start to finish! Feel free to skip around to whatever topic you want to work on.

Each chapter includes multiple cross-references so that whenever I use a word, phrase, or concept that you may not be familiar with, you can flip to that section to get an explanation. Cross-references tell you where in the book I introduce or go into detail about the item in question.

## Foolish Assumptions

My first assumption is that you want or need to know more about fractions, decimals, and percentages, perhaps because you are

- » **A student** who wants to get a solid understanding of fractions, either to get through your homework or to do well on an upcoming test.
- » **An adult** who needs to get clarity on some aspects of fractions that you feel a little shaky about, so that math doesn't hold you back from your educational or career plans.
- » **The parent, relative, or friend** of somebody in one of the two groups above, and you want to support them in conquering fractions.

Whatever the reason you're reading this book, I try to give you as much help as possible. As long as you have a basic understanding of addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division by using whole numbers, you should be good to go. Here's a quick test to see if you're ready:

$$8 + 4 = \underline{\quad} \quad 14 - 7 = \underline{\quad} \quad 7 \times 5 = \underline{\quad} \quad 30 \div 6 = \underline{\quad}$$

If you can answer these four questions (the answers are 12, 7, 35, and 5), consider yourself ready to go.

## Icons Used in This Book

Throughout the book, you'll see the following four icons, which can help you navigate your way.



REMEMBER

This icon highlights important information that you need to understand and remember. Make sure to get clear on this information before moving on. You can also use these icons when studying for a test.



TIP

Tips include easier and usually quicker ways to solve problems. Refer to them to help you move through the practice problems more easily.



WARNING

This icon warns you of common mistakes that students make if they're not careful. Take note and proceed with caution!



PRACTICE

Practice problems give you a chance to try out the skills you just worked on, to see whether you fully understand them. If you get stuck, flip to the end of the chapter, where the answer awaits — in some cases, accompanied by a step-by-step in the solution.

## Beyond the Book

*Fractions For Dummies* isn't just a book. It's also a passport to other resources available on the For Dummies website ([www.dummies.com](http://www.dummies.com)); be sure to check out the Cheat Sheet, where you can find extra information to help you embrace the joy of fractions. To access the Cheat Sheet, go to [www.dummies.com](http://www.dummies.com) and type the words "Fractions For Dummies Cheat Sheet" in the Search text box.

Additionally, I have several YouTube playlists that you may find helpful for working with fractions. You can find these at the following links:

» **Math – Fractions 1:** <https://tinyurl.com/5yh7dcpc>

» **Math – Fractions 2:** <https://tinyurl.com/y9x6nmn7>

» **Math – Fractions 3:** <https://tinyurl.com/4vkvj2cj>

## Where to Go from Here

You can use this book in a variety of ways. If you're reading this without feeling that you're under immediate pressure to do a homework assignment or study for a test, feel free to start at the beginning and work your way forward.

Chapter 1 gives you an overview of fractions, decimals, and percentages. And Chapters 2 and 3 provide a variety of skills that I believe can help you succeed in all sorts of ways.

But if you need to know something *now* — or preferably *yesterday* — to keep up with your current math class, go ahead and refer to the Index or Table of Contents to skip directly to that topic. In every chapter, I do my best to orient you to the topic at hand, providing plenty of worked-through examples so that you can see not only what you need to know, but how to do it yourself.

No matter what order you choose to read this book in, I promise you that on every page, you can find something that can help you along in your understanding of fractions.



# 1

## **An Overview of Fractions, Decimals, and Percents**

### **IN THIS PART . . .**

Introduce yourself to fractions, decimals, and percents.

Refresh on the basic math that you need to succeed when studying fractions.

Work with factors and multiples as an important building block for fractions.

#### IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Expressing fractions as a numerator divided by a denominator
- » Working with place value in decimals
- » Understanding percents as a number out of 100
- » Representing part of a whole by using fractions, decimals, or percents

## Chapter 1

# What Are Fractions, Decimals, and Percents?

**W**elcome to your journey into the world of fractions! If you pick up this book, you're probably feeling a bit unsure about fractions, and that's completely okay. You're not alone — many people find fractions tricky. The good news is that understanding fractions is like honing any new skill. In the same way that you may have figured out how to balance so that you could ride a bike or caught onto the basic rules of play for a new game, you can grasp the concepts and calculations associated with fractions if you have patience, practice, and the right guidance.

This book is designed to be your friendly companion while you explore fractions and their close cousins, decimals and percents. I give you the basics, breaking down what fractions are and why they matter. I also help you tackle problems one step at a time,

with plenty of examples, tips, and encouragement along the way. My goal is to keep you from ever feeling lost or overwhelmed when working with fractions.

Remember, everyone figures things out at their own pace. So take your time, ask questions, and even make mistakes — you have to do all of those things to get good at anything. And with the help offered in this book, not only can you understand fractions, but you might also discover that they're not so scary, after all.

## Taking a First Look at Fractions

At a basic level, fractions give you a way to represent parts of a whole. Imagine that you have a pizza, and you cut it into eight equal slices. If you eat one slice out of eight, you've eaten one part of the eight slices, or  $\frac{1}{8}$  of the pizza. That's a fraction! Fractions help us understand and work with pieces of something, whether it's food, time, money, or anything else that can be divided into equal sections.

In the following sections, I explain how fractions work to represent parts of the whole, how to read and write fractions for use in calculations, and why fractions are so useful.

### Understanding how fractions work

Fractions use two numbers to show how much of an item you're working with after you divide the whole into equal parts. For example, if you have a chocolate bar that's divided into 4 equal pieces and you eat 3 pieces, the fraction that represents what you ate is  $\frac{3}{4}$ . In this fraction, you use two numbers, 3 and 4, which you write one over the other with a vertical line in between.

Here are the names for these two numbers:

- » **Numerator:** The top number in a fraction (3 in the chocolate bar example), which shows how many of the equal parts you're specifically working with (in this case, you ate them)
- » **Denominator:** The bottom number in a fraction (4 in the chocolate bar example), which shows the total number of equal parts that the whole is divided into

As another example, imagine that you have a rope that's 10 meters long, and you cut off a 7-meter piece. The fraction representing the part of the rope that you cut off is  $\frac{7}{10}$ . The numerator is 7 (because you cut 7 meters), and the denominator is 10 (because the whole rope was 10 meters long).

## Making sense of equivalent fractions

Unlike whole numbers, where different numbers always represent different values (for example, 3 is always less than 5), fractions are a bit more flexible. A pair of fractions can look different, each containing a different *numerator* (top number) and *denominator* (bottom number), and yet their value can be exactly the same.

Different number combinations can represent the same value because fractions rely on the relationship between the numerator and the denominator. For example,  $\frac{1}{2}$  and  $\frac{2}{4}$  might seem different at first glance, but they actually represent the same amount. In both cases, you're talking about half of something — whether it's 1 out of 2 parts, or 2 out of 4 parts.



REMEMBER

Pairs of fractions like this (such as the  $\frac{1}{2}$  and  $\frac{2}{4}$  example) are called *equivalent fractions*. Even though the numerators and denominators are different numbers, the value that they represent is the same. You really need to keep this idea in mind when you add, subtract, and compare fractions! (I go in depth about equivalent fractions in Chapter 4, so flip there if you want all the details.)

## Understanding improper fractions

When you think about fractions, you might think of them as numbers that are less than 1 — that is, numbers that fall between 0 and 1 on the number line. These types of fractions, where the numerator is smaller than the denominator, are called *proper fractions*. For example,  $\frac{4}{5}$  is a proper fraction because 4 is less than 5, so the value it represents is less than 1.

However, fractions can also be equal to or greater than 1, and these types of fractions are called *improper fractions*. In an improper fraction, the numerator is equal to or larger than the denominator, which means that the fraction represents one whole or more.

Improper fractions are common in the real world. For example,  $\frac{5}{4}$  is an improper fraction. It tells us that we have 5 parts, but each whole is made up of only 4 parts. So, if you have  $\frac{5}{4}$  of a cake, you have 1 whole cake and an extra  $\frac{1}{4}$  of another identical cake.

Similarly, if you have 7 meters of fabric divided into 2-meter sections, you have  $\frac{7}{2}$ , which is 3 and a half sections.

## Seeing how improper fractions and mixed numbers relate

In the preceding section, you can explore improper fractions — fractions where the numerator is equal to or greater than the denominator. But in this section, you can find out about another way to express these fractions as mixed numbers. A *mixed number* is simply a combination of a whole number and a proper fraction. It gives you another way of showing the same value that an improper fraction does, but in a form that you can often more easily visualize or understand.

For example, I revisit the improper fraction  $\frac{5}{4}$  that I talk about in the preceding section. This fraction tells you that you have more than one whole, but how much more? To express  $\frac{5}{4}$  as a mixed

number, you break it down into one whole ( $\frac{4}{4}$ ) and the remaining  $\frac{1}{4}$ . So,  $\frac{5}{4}$  is the same as the mixed number  $1\frac{1}{4}$ . Both represent the same amount — 1 whole and  $\frac{1}{4}$  of another whole.

In real life, mixed numbers come up often. Imagine that you're baking (something really sweet) and using 2 full cups of sugar, plus another half cup. Instead of saying that you have  $\frac{5}{2}$  cups, you probably say you have  $2\frac{1}{2}$  cups of sugar. Both expressions are valid, but the mixed number is a little easier to understand in a real-world situation.

Consider another example when measuring length: If you have a board that's 3 full meters, plus an additional  $\frac{1}{10}$  of a meter, you could express that as  $\frac{31}{10}$  of a meter. However, this amount is probably easier to understand if you use the equivalent mixed number  $3\frac{1}{10}$  meters.



REMEMBER

Every mixed number is just another way of writing an improper fraction, and it offers you a clearer picture of how many whole items and how many parts you have than an improper fraction does.

## Seeing Why Decimals Are So User-Friendly

In this section, I want to help you explore a way to express values that fall between whole numbers, allowing you to sidestep using fractions. (See the section “Taking a First Look at Fractions,” earlier in this chapter, for an overview of fractions.) *Decimals* are a more user-friendly alternative to fractions because they align neatly with our base-10 number system, which makes them easier to understand and use in everyday situations.

Although fractions such as  $\frac{1}{2}$  or  $\frac{3}{4}$  represent parts of a whole, decimals express the same ideas, but in a different format. For

example, instead of saying  $\frac{1}{2}$ , you can use the decimal 0.5. Similarly, you can express  $\frac{3}{4}$  as 0.75.



TIP

The digits that fall to the right of the period in a decimal represent the *decimal places*, which I describe in the following two sections.

Decimals are especially handy in contexts such as money, measurements (especially the metric system), and technology, where precision is a key aspect. Whether you calculate the total cost of items at the store, measure ingredients for a recipe, or read a digital scale, decimals offer a straightforward and precise way to represent values that aren't whole numbers. And decimals also bypass many of the difficulties that calculating with fractions can carry (for example, finding a common denominator and simplifying your answer — see Chapter 4 for more on these subtleties of fractions).

In the sections that follow, you can find out how decimals work, how to convert between fractions and decimals, and how to use decimals in various real-world scenarios. And you can discover just how versatile and helpful decimals can be.

## Understanding decimals that have one decimal place

*Decimal place value*, meaning how far each decimal digit is from the decimal point, helps you understand the value of the digits in a decimal number. For decimals that have only one decimal place (that is, one digit to the right of the period), each digit represents *tenths* of the whole.

For example, in the decimal number 0.9, the digit 9 is in the tenths place, where it represents 9 out of 10 equal parts of a whole. So, 0.9 is the same as  $\frac{9}{10}$  of a whole.

Here are a few real-world examples to illustrate how to interpret decimals:

» **Measuring weight:** If you have a bag of nails that weighs 2.3 kilograms, the digit 3 in the tenths place represents  $\frac{3}{10}$



of a kilogram (or 300 grams because one kilogram contains 1000 grams). Thus, the bag of nails weighs 2 kilograms, plus an additional  $\frac{3}{10}$  of a kilogram.

» **Measuring length:** If you have a piece of ribbon that's 3.4 meters long, the digit 4 in the tenths place means  $\frac{4}{10}$  of a meter (or 40 centimeters because one meter contains 100 centimeters). Thus, the ribbon is 3 meters plus another  $\frac{4}{10}$  of a meter in length.

» **Cooking:** If a recipe calls for 1.5 cups of flour, the 5 in the tenths place represents  $\frac{5}{10}$  of a cup, which equals half a cup (because 5 is half of 10). So, 1.5 cups is equal to 1 cup plus an extra half a cup of flour.

The preceding examples show you that decimals use a digit's place value to represent a fraction by applying a format that's similar to whole numbers. This similarity means that you can make calculations and comparisons more easily with decimals than with fractions.

## Understanding decimals that have two decimal places

After understanding decimals that have one decimal place — the tenths place, which breaks a whole into 10 equal parts (see the preceding section) — you can move on to decimals that have two decimal places. These decimals break a whole into 100 equal parts, which are called *hundredths*.

When you have two decimal places, the second digit represents hundredths. For example, 0.01 means 1 out of 100 equal parts of a whole. Similarly, 0.25 means 25 out of 100 equal parts. Think of it like cutting something into 100 tiny pieces and counting how many pieces you have.

Here are some real-world examples of what decimals that have two places represent:

- » **Counting money:** In the United States, people most commonly use decimals that have two places when dealing with money. You can break down every U.S. dollar into 100 cents, where each cent is represented as the decimal \$0.01. So, if you have \$0.25, you have  $\frac{25}{100}$  of a dollar, or 25 cents.
- » **Measuring length:** Another common use for decimals involves measuring length by using the metric system. For example, imagine that you're measuring the thickness of a short stack of paper, like your term paper, and it measures 0.08 centimeters. This means that the paper is  $\frac{8}{100}$  of a centimeter thick, or 8 out of 100 equal parts of a centimeter.
- » **Measuring weight:** Metric weight measurements commonly use decimals. For example, if you weigh a small object and find that it weighs 0.35 kilograms, this indicates that the object weighs  $\frac{35}{100}$  of a kilogram, or 35 out of 100 equal parts of a kilogram.

## Understanding fraction-decimal equivalence

Fractions (flip back to the section “Taking a First Look at Fractions,” earlier in this chapter) and decimals are two contrasting but mathematically equivalent ways of representing parts of a whole. Although they might look different, they both express the same idea: how much of something you have relative to its whole.

And because fractions and decimals express the same ideas, you can convert between them. The following tells you how to convert

- » **From fractions to decimals:** Simply divide the numerator by the denominator. For instance, to convert the fraction  $\frac{3}{5}$  to a decimal, divide 3 by 5, which equals 0.6.

» **From decimals to fractions:** Write the decimal as a fraction that has a denominator based on its place value.

For example, you can write 0.46 as  $\frac{46}{100}$ , which simplifies to  $\frac{23}{50}$ . (You can find out the nuances of how to simplify a fraction in Chapter 4.)

Because fractions and decimals are just two sides of the same coin, you can switch between these forms as needed, making it easier to work with parts of a whole in different contexts.

## Putting Percents into Perspective

You can describe parts of a whole as fractions (discussed in the section “Taking a First Look at Fractions,” earlier in this chapter) and decimals (check out the section “Seeing Why Decimals Are So User-Friendly,” earlier in this chapter); I want to introduce a third way to describe them. You can use *percents*, in the same way that you can use fractions and decimals, to express what part of a whole you have.

For example, you can express a part of a whole as a fraction (for example,  $\frac{1}{2}$ ) or an equivalent decimal (0.5), and you can also express the equivalent amount as a percent (50%). Percents are a useful and often intuitive way to communicate proportions, especially in everyday contexts such as sales discounts, real estate and investment calculations, and statistics and probability.

In the following sections, you can explore how to understand, calculate, and use percents in various situations. And you can make connections between fractions, decimals, and percents while you proceed so that you can see how you can use percents as a powerful tool for comparing and understanding parts of a whole.

# Making sense of percents



REMEMBER

The word *percent* comes from the Latin phrase *per centum*, which literally means *per hundred*. So that can clue you in that percents tell you how many parts you're dealing with specifically, out of 100 equal parts.

For example, if something is 75% of the whole, it means that you're counting 75 out of 100 equal parts. This idea of breaking things into 100 parts makes percents (like decimals) particularly handy for understanding proportions and making comparisons in the real world. For example:

- » **Sales and discounts:** Suppose that a store is having a 20% off sale. If an item originally costs \$50, a 20% discount means that you pay less by taking 20 out of every 100 parts of the original price. To calculate this, you find 20% of \$50, which is \$10:

$$\$50 \times \frac{20}{100} = \frac{1,000}{100} = \$10$$

So the item will now cost \$40:

$$\$50 - \$10 = \$40$$

- » **Test scores:** Imagine that you take a test and score 85%. This score means that you answered 85 out of every 100 questions correctly. If the test had 100 questions, you got 85 of the questions right. If the test had 200 questions (I hope not!), you got 170 correct ( $\frac{85}{100} = \frac{170}{200}$ , and are equivalent fractions; for more on this topic, check out Chapter 4).
- » **Battery life:** How about if your phone shows that it has 60% battery remaining? This percentage means that the phone has over half of its total battery capacity still available; or in other words, 60 out of 100 equal parts of the battery's charge are still available to use.

These examples show how percents show up in everyday life and make it easier to understand and compare different quantities.

# Converting percents to decimals and fractions

Because percents represent parts of a whole — just as fractions and decimals do — when you understand how to convert between these equivalent expressions, you can understand and calculate with these three values more easily. These conversions allow you to switch between different representations of the same value, depending on what form is most convenient and applicable to the situation. Knowing how to move between these forms helps you compare values, perform calculations, and better understand the relationships between different quantities.

## Converting percents to decimals, and vice versa

Percents and decimals are closely related because they both represent parts of a whole using the base-10 system. Converting between these two forms is straightforward and requires only a few simple steps.

To convert a percent to a decimal, follow these steps:

- 1. Remove the percent sign (%).**

If you're working with 75%, write it as simply 75.

- 2. Divide the number by 100.**

You can easily do this calculation by moving the decimal point two places to the left.

For example, 75 becomes 0.75 because  $75 \div 100 = 0.75$ .

To convert a decimal to a percent, follow these steps:

- 1. Multiply the decimal by 100.**

Just move the decimal point two places to the right.

For example, 0.25 becomes 25 because  $0.25 \times 100 = 25$ .

- 2. Add the percent sign (%).**

So the 25 calculated in Step 1 becomes 25%.