

Dates Can Drive You Nuts (and I'm not talking about food!)

- by Stan Kaplan, WB9RQR
105 Martin Drive
Port Washington, WI 53074-9654
(414) 284-9346
WB9RQR @ N9PBY.EN63BI.WI.USA.NA
skaplan@mcw.edu

Happy New Year! What does 1/12/99 mean? To most people in the US it means the 12th of January. However, to most Europeans, it means the 1st of December. What does it mean when you receive a QSL card from France with 1/12/99 on it? From Germany? From Iceland? From Japan?

At the very least, the answer is ambiguous! Perhaps the writer of the card is converting to our US system as a courtesy. Might you convert to the European system when sending a QSL card to England? Confusion, confusion! But it need not be confusing anymore, provided that we all adhere to an international standard set over 25 years ago. Indeed, at least part of the Y2K (Year 2000) computer problem exists because of our failure to embrace this standard in the USA.

The international standard is ISO 8601, which is accepted in many countries in the world. Simply, you record dates in full format, in the following order:

YEAR-MONTH-DAY or YYYY-MM-DD

In other words, you record the year using all four digits, and use leading zeroes for the month and day from 00 to 09. Use a hyphen in between numerical elements. Thus, our 12 January 1999 example above would be written:

1999-01-12

Or, if you prefer 1999 Jan 12

Or even 1999 January 12

If time is included, it must follow the same intuitive sequence of larger to smaller. So, 3:05 p.m. would be written:

15:05 or 15:05:23 if 23 seconds are to be added.

Packet radio users will probably recognize that some TNCs have used this format for years. For example, to reset your KPC-3 TNC to the date and time shown above, one types at the prompt:

DAYTIME 19990112150523

It is a big string of numbers, to be sure, but it is really easy to conceptualize and execute. Just remember: larger to smaller, years are four digits, all other elements are two digits.

Once we pass the year 2000, it will be particularly important that all of us use this standard. As pointed out by Ian Galpin (G1SMD) in the August 1997 issue of QST (p. 69), we will soon be faced with highly ambiguous dates such as 05/07/02, which currently means 5 July 2002 in England, May 7, 2002 in the US and 2005 July 2 in Japan! On the other hand, perhaps 1902 or 1905 was the writer's intention, instead of 2002 or 2005. We've just got to get with the standard to avoid ambiguity.

So, how should you start? DOS users, get out your manual and study COUNTRY.SYS, then install it in your CONFIG.SYS file with the proper code page selection. Windows 3.1 users go to your international date/time settings in the Control Panel to make the needed changes. Windows 95 users open the Regional Settings in the Control Panel, and click the Date tab. Then, for the Short Date Style type in yyyy-mm-dd, and for the Long Date Style type in: yyyy MMMM dd. Click the Apply button and you are done. Start using the new format in formal letters and other documents, but also begin using it when writing dates by hand. It will pay off. Everyone will know exactly what you mean by 1999-01-12 or 1999 January 12. Happy New Year again, and Happy Computing!