

Ten Fingers, Ten Toes

Scenario:

As a result of a disturbance in the space-time continuum, your team, a group of scientists from the National Institute of Standards and Technology, has landed in Central Virginia, not far from Monticello, Thomas Jefferson's home. It is the year 1789. Jefferson is about to make his proposal to Congress advocating a decimal system of weights and measures. You know that Congress will not act on his report and realize that you have an opportunity to change the course of history. With your modern knowledge, advise him on how to improve his presentation. He is a busy man but respects your knowledge and expertise. He grants you ten minutes to make your case.

Possible topics to cover (these are only suggestions and are not a requirement for a superior presentation):

1. What does "decimal" mean?
2. Why is Jefferson preparing a report to Congress instead of another branch of government or scientific body?
3. What were the weaknesses of his proposed system?
4. How could his system be improved?
5. What would be the benefits of adopting the International System of Units?
6. How could Jefferson get Congress to act on it?
7. What problems have resulted from having two systems in use now?
8. What is the vocabulary associated with switching to the metric system?

Possible Sources

Newspapers, scientists, mathematicians, library books, videos, encyclopedias, science textbooks
ERS Portal sources: Facts on File, United Streaming, California Streaming, World Book Online, Associate Press Extensive Photo Archive and Thinkfinity: <http://www.erslibrary.org>

Internet websites:

MSN Encarta: http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761561345/Metric_System.html

http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761571220/International_System_of_Units.html

University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill:

<http://www.unc.edu/~rowlett/units/usmetric.html>

National Institute of Standards and Technology: <http://www.nist.gov/>

Bibliography

Be sure to have a printed bibliography to hand to the judges before you begin your presentation. You are encouraged to cite all of your sources including graphics. A simple web tool to organize your bibliography can be found at <http://citationmachine.net/>.