Telling the Time Words: 'O'Clock' Isn't a Number, It's a Clue

Year 1 children in England learn to tell the time to the hour and half hour. This page explains one key idea that helps many children: 'o'clock' and 'half past' aren't magic labels to memorise—they're descriptions of where the clock's hands actually are. When children understand what the hands are doing, telling the time clicks into place.

What it is

In Year 1, your child is learning to read an analogue clock—a clock with hands that move round the face. They'll start by telling the time to the hour (3 o'clock, 4 o'clock) and to the half hour (half past 3, half past 4). Often, children treat these as words to remember rather than as descriptions of what the hands are doing. This page unpacks what 'o'clock' and 'half past' actually mean, so your child can start to understand *why* the hands are where they are, rather than just guessing or memorising. That understanding is what makes time-telling a real skill.

What happens

At exactly o'clock (say, 3 o'clock), the short hand—the hour hand—points directly at the number. The long hand—the minute hand—points straight up at 12. When it's half past (like 3 and a half), the hour hand has moved halfway between two numbers (between 3 and 4), and the minute hand points at 6. The hour hand is always moving slowly, creeping from one number to the next throughout the hour. Once children spot this pattern—that the hour hand's position tells you how far through the hour you are—they can read the time themselves instead of relying on memory.

What it means for your child

When your child grasps this, telling the time stops feeling like learning random labels and starts feeling like solving a puzzle. They move from 'I think that says half past because we learned it' to 'The long hand is at 6 and the short hand is between the numbers, so that *must* be half past.' This shift—from memorising to understanding—is where real learning happens. It also means they can work out times you haven't explicitly taught them yet, which builds their confidence and independence. Many children find this a genuine 'aha' moment.

How you can help at home

You don't need worksheets. The best practice happens in everyday life. During breakfast, lunch, bedtime or playtime, glance at a clock together and ask: 'Where's the short hand pointing? Where's the long hand?' rather than 'What time is it?' This focuses your child's attention on the hands themselves. If it's o'clock, point out that the short hand is pointing at a number and the long hand is at 12. If it's half past, show them the short hand is halfway between two numbers and the long hand is at 6. A few moments like this, sprinkled through the week, are far more helpful than a timed worksheet.

Questions parents often ask

Does my child need to memorise every time? No. Once they understand where the hands go at o'clock and half past, they can work these out. *What if my child seems confused?* That's normal—

understanding takes time. Stick with o'clock and half past; quarter past and quarter to come later in Year 1 or Year 2. *Can I use a digital clock to teach this?* Digital clocks show numbers, not hand positions, so they don't help with understanding this concept. Analogue clocks—with hands—teach the idea. *How much practice does my child need?* Short, playful moments are better than long sessions. Two or three times a week, alongside what they do at school, is enough.

Sources

- Department for Education: Key Stage 1 Mathematics Curriculum (National Curriculum)
- GOV.UK: Mathematics guidance for Key Stage 1