AOW Week 2

1. Mark your confusion…
2. Show evidence of close reading; mark up the text with questions and/or comments
3. Be a skeptic!
4. Write a one-page reflection on your own sheet of paper.

JAMIE CONDLIFFE, OP-ED, 1/02/13 9:18am

It's Time For the US to Go Metric

The US has a love affair with imperial units: height in inches, milk in quarts, weight in pounds. You name it, and it's measured in imperial. The only problem? Imperial is dumb. So let's cast of those shackles and join the rest of the world by embracing units that make sense. Let's go metric, once and for all.

The US is one of the few countries left in the world which is yet to convert to metric, and this petition is lobbying the nation's lawmakers to change that. It was created on December 31st and is yet to gain much traction—so it needs your help to give it a push. Why make the move? A (metric) ton of reasons.

Imperial is archaic and irrelevant

Let's take a step back. Imperial measurements have roots which can be traced back—sketchily—though Egyptian and Persian history, though the first occurrence of a measure we all know can be found written out in the Magna Carta, signed in 1215, that reads:

"There shall be one measure of wine throughout our whole realm, and one measure of ale and one measure of corn—namely, the London quart;—and one width of dyed and russet and hauberk cloths—namely, two ells below the selvage…."

Priorities. Anyway, the imperial units we now know slowly evolved over next 600 years, being added to as and when required. Eventually, they were gathered together and made official in the United Kingdom in 1824 by a Weights and Measures Act. US weights and measures are—very subtly—different to those in the UK, and were made official in the Mendenhall Order of 1893. It was updated in 1959, sure, but its roots are in a bygone age and, as a result, they now make little sense.

There are too many imperial units

The imperial measurement system employs completely different units for each measurement—and each one can be measured using one of many different units. If that doesn't make much sense, let's try a small comparison. Take, for instance, units of volume. In imperial, you can take your pick from:

gallon, liquid quart, dry quart, liquid pint, dry pint, fluid ounce, teaspoon, tablespoon, minim, fluid dram, gill, peck, bushel, cubic inch, cubic foot, cubic yard, cubic fathom, cubic rod, cubic furlong, cubic mile, cubic league, cubic mil, cubic pole, cubic perch, cubic hand, cubic link, cubic chain

In metric, that list is a little shorter:

liter

OK, so you have to include a prefix to shift by factors of ten—centi means a hundredth, milli means a thousandth, kilo means a thousand, and so on—but you only need to understand one fundamental measure. The rest is about scaling.

It's impossible to scale imperial easily

And that scaling is hugely important. Think about how you shift between length scales in your head: in imperial, there's no consistency. You have 12 inches in a foot, 3 feet in a yard, 1,760 yards in a mile. There is no neat way to jump between those units without tortuous mental arithmetic.

Conversely, metric units rely entirely on factors of ten—perhaps the easiest mental arithmetic possible. The best bit, of course, is that metric prefixes apply to each and every metric measurement: move to volume, or weight, or whatever, and they work just the same. You only have to learn one rule, and from then on things are easy.

And that's the wonderful, beautiful thing about metric: it's beguilingly simple and, as a result, extremely powerful. The fact that the US—perhaps the world's leading technological and scientific power—chooses to make life more difficult for itself by using an archaic set of measures is mind-boggling. The fact that at times the refusal to change creates a measurement barrier which makes collaborative work between countries almost impossible is a joke. It's time to change that. It's time to leave inches and yards behind, and embrace a glorious metered future.