



FORM NUMBERS & TITLES

INFORMATIONAL ARTICLE

Form Numbers and Titles

What's so important about a form number? What purpose does a form number serve? What purpose does a form title serve? What constitutes a "good" form number and title? These seemingly simple questions create a lot of debate within the forms community and can result in significantly increased costs for a business or government agency.

Let's start with the form number. It seems to me that this number serves several distinct purposes:

- Helps search and find efforts
- Used as a reference within a procedure
- Legitimizes the form
- Provides a kind of "shorthand" for referring to the form

In this context, the form identifier can consist of several elements, including:

- Base form number
- Record number
- Edition date
- Language version
- Type identifier
- State or Province version
- Responsible department
- Line of business identifier
- Business system identifier
- Status
- AKA (Also Known As)
- Cost center code
- Packaging Configuration
- Related To (other forms)

Obviously, incorporating all these identifiers into a form number would be quite confusing and maybe even incomprehensible! Fortunately, there is a process that simplifies this.

Let's start with the basic form number. It should be simple, unique to the form, and easily remembered and understood by all users, even the general public. Therefore, we advocate the form number starting with a five-digit number, 10000, and simply increment by one for each new number. That works fine, but it doesn't provide for all the variations the form can take. When adding these variations, the form number no longer is unique, therefore losing its value as a primary key in a database.

To get around this problem, we can add a Record Number that serves as the primary key in the database. This would be an automatically increasing number, beginning with one (1). Our data table looks like this:

Record#	Form#
1	10000

The next identifier is the Edition Date. We use the edition to describe the date the form became active and express the format as mm/yyyy. All forms, even the first edition of the form, have an edition date. There can be more than one edition for a given form, either concurrently active, or one active and one obsolete, and so forth. Our data table now looks something like this:

Record#	Form#	EditionDate
1	10000	11/1999
2	10000	02/2006

Each edition of each form can exist in a variety of formats, including language versions, state or provincial versions, electronic formats (Types), and more. Since we need a unique way to identify each variation, we can simply add more records, giving each one a unique identifier (primary key in the data table). Using this methodology, we never run out of primary keys; we simply add more fields to our table. The result looks something like the following:

Record#	Form#	EditionDate	Language	Type	State/Prov	RespDept	LOB	BusSys	CostCtr
1	10000	11/1999	EN	Paper	All	1002	Annuities	Sales	56
2	10000	02/2006	EN	Paper	All	1002	Annuities	Sales	56
3	10000	02/2006	FR	Paper	PQ	1002	Annuities	Sales	56
4	10001	05/2004	EN	PDF	All	5006	Life	UW	861
5	10002	11/2005	EN	Paper	All	3200	ADD	Legal	500
6	10002	11/2005	EN	PDF	All	3200	ADD	Legal	500
7	10002	11/2005	EN	Word	All	3200	ADD	Legal	500
8	10003	10/2004	FR	PDF	PQ	5006	Life	UW	861
9	10003	05/2005	FR	PDF	PQ	5006	Life	UW	861

In this scheme, any number of variations can be provided because the Record Number is unique. A search for a form returns all the variations for a base form number, or the user can bookmark the Record Number. The Form Number cannot be the primary key because it is repeated with each variation. The Record Number cannot be the form number because it doesn't uniquely describe the form.

As for printing identifiers on the container, there are really no restrictions except practically. For example, the container could include identifiers such as:

Form ADD-10002 EN PDF (11/2005)

This identifies the form as Form 10002, Nov. 2005 edition, English version, PDF variation, assigned to the Accidental Death & Dismemberment line-of-business. There is no conflict with the database for the person looking at the form.

Some schemes attempt to encode all the data into a form number. This is generally not a good idea because as business systems and procedures change, changes to the form number become necessary. The numbering scheme described above is indifferent to any such changes. Of course, the more information printed on the container, the more changes are required when re-printing or updating the container.

Example of an Existing Form Numbering System:

The example below is the form numbering system for a large North American insurance company with many complex requirements. It is presented for discussion and comparison purposes only. It illustrates the complex requirements that do exist, and the author's comments are intended to show how it can be simplified. **The author's comments are in color.**

As can be seen, by this one example of a real forms numbering system, the tracking of forms is a complex process. Many variations, iterations, and relationships need to be considered. Using a relational database is crucial. Each artwork file must have a unique Form Number, regardless of how many exceptions exist. Each variation of the basic artwork file must have a unique Record Number and the same Form Number. All other variations are recorded in specialized fields in the database. All forms and all variations must fit within the same database structure. Special situations should not create exceptions to the numbering process.

Form Number Naming Conventions (1)

- The standard form number naming convention (root form number) for business forms is: formno (revdate). For example, APV1 (052005).

While I agree with the format, I would separate the month from the year in the revdate to make it easier to read. Example APV1 (05/2005)

- Forms are created in different platforms. The platforms are:
 - Hard Copy Form or BFPOD
 - FPDF
 - AFP
 - WEB
 - PDF completed via computer application
 - SCIS (Special Catalogue Issuance System)NOTE: A catalogue PDF of a pre-printed product is not a different platform

In the ideal system, these are versions. Versions are identified and stored in a data table, making it possible to have many unique version identifiers. Each unique form can have many versions, with a unique record number identifying each one. If a paper form also exists as a PDF form, I would capture each one as a different version.

- Brand new items are assigned temporary numbers (NEWxxxx). This is used until a permanent number is assigned to the item or it is used as a job ID for one-off jobs that are filed in the miscellaneous files.
Temporary numbers are used for one-off print orders. Temporary numbers are obtained from the secretary general and logged. If a one-off number comes up for reorder, it is handled in one of two ways:
 - The previous/existing temporary form number is obtained from the log and re-used. The Analyst should check WOTS to determine the latest version as it may have been ordered more than once in different years.
 - The item is given a business area form number. The Analyst should check WOTS to determine the latest version as it may have been ordered more than once in different years.

I assign new items using the same numbering system as for all items. The table "Status" contains several status codes, one of which is "Pending". This helps keep track of new jobs. I have another Status – "Revised", which tracks existing forms undergoing revision. If a new form never reaches Active status, I change the Status from "Pending" to "Abandoned". The only exception is that I fill the edition date of a new item with zeros (00/0000) until the form reaches Active status.

For one-off print jobs, I use the standard numbering system. The only difference is that instead of “Active” status, I use “One Time” status code so I can keep track of them. If the one-time form is re-ordered, I change its status to “Active”, since it is not really one-time.

- Business forms have business area form numbers (APV, CL, HR, etc.).

This is a common problem area. The Business System should be captured and stored in a separate table and not made a part of the form number. If a business reorganizes, or through acquisitions and mergers things change, the form number should not be required to be changed. Using the Business Systems table, the form can simply be re-assigned. A form can be assigned to a Primary Business System, a Secondary Business System, etc. These assignments are simply added as fields to the form record that point to the business system table.

- Department process-related web forms receive WEB numbers (WEB 1234, etc.). When a new web form is required, E-forms will search the database to determine whether a similar form with a business area form number already exists.

Web forms should receive no special treatment within the forms numbering system. Each is simply indicated as a Version.

- If an existing web form (i.e. WEB 1234) is required on another platform, it is assigned a business area form number. For example:
 - WEB1234
 - EG1 – Web form (was WEB 1234) (example only)
 - EG1A – BFS (example only)

Having the same form on multiple platforms should not require a separate form number. It is a different version of the same form. It would have a distinct Record Number for tracking purposes.

- Forms that are converted to a different platform where the previous version is discontinued will continue to use the existing form number. For example:
 - APF 185 (042004)

When a form is converted to a different platform, it is assigned a new Version ID. The form number remains the same. If the previous version is discontinued, its Status is changed to Obsolete.

- Forms that are converted to a different platform where the previous version is required for a limited period of time will require an alpha after the root form number. For example:
 - APF 185A (042004)

This system probably has no meaning to the average user. I would stay within the standard numbering system. The previous version would be changed to Pending Obsolete status. This enables the Forms Manager to track such forms and achieve a final resolution.

- Forms that co-exist on different platforms, serve the same function, and use the same native artwork file do not require an alpha after the root form number. NOTE: Forms that co-exist in both hard copy and FPDF format are handled in one of two ways:
 - If the hard copy form and the FPDF are identical and only one native artwork file is required, then the standard form number naming convention is used and the hard copy form database record is hidden. For example:
 - CL 113 (052005) – FPDF
 - CL 113 (052005) – Hard Copy (record is hidden) (example only)

- In rare cases, if the hard copy form and the FPDF differ and two native artwork files are required, the hard copy uses the standard form number naming convention and the FPDF version has the word “fill” in lower case letters after the revision date without a space: formno (revdate)fill. The word “fill” also appears in the native electronic file naming convention: formno (revdate) fill.indd. For example:

- CL 113 (052005) – Hard Copy
- CL 113 (052005)fill – FPDF

Once the form artwork file is updated to match, revert to Option 1.

I find all this quite confusing and meaningless to most users. I would stay within the recommending forms numbering system and use Version and Status codes to manage the process. In all cases, if a form uses the same native artwork file, it has a unique root form number. If there are two separate artwork files, then each requires a unique root form number. If the two forms are related, the relationship is indicated in the field titled “Related To”. The “Related To” field is also used to show relationships between a form and its envelope, etc.

- Forms that co-exist on different platforms, serve the same function, and use different native artwork files require an alpha after the root form number. The alpha suffixes have no meaning tied to them. For example:
 - APV 334 – Snap set form
 - APV 334C – Snap set form without policy number
 - APV 334D – AFP Form
 - APV334E – Web Form (example only)
 - APV334L – PDF Form completed via computer application

Exception to the rule: Forms on the SCIS system will maintain the same form number as the current or previously printed hard copy as these forms are legislated. Electronic files will be maintained by Forms & Publishing for SCIS forms that hold the form number of a discontinued hard copy form so that it can be posted on the Forms Index.

Again, I use the same form number for all versions of a form that have the same artwork file. If a different artwork file is required, it is assigned a new form number and a Related To ID.

This does bring up a very interesting area – legislated forms or forms requiring specific approvals. Whenever possible, I prefer to remain within the standard numbering system. If this is not possible, I try to accommodate the legislated form number within the AKA (Also Known As) field. If that is not possible, I would add a field to the database titled “Regulatory Number”. I print on the form what is required, provide users a search field, yet stay true to the standard numbering system. It would be very rare to be unable to accommodate any regulated numbers.

- Forms with alternate paper versions that serve the same function/purpose but have different construction, packaging, etc. and are stocked in the warehouse have an alpha number after the root number. For example:
 - MV2903 (062004)
 - MV2903A (062004)

Again, there is no reason to deviate from the standard numbering system. Packaging, construction, etc. are simply recorded in different fields within the database. If a form has two or more packaging configurations, they are handled as Versions of the same form. In rare cases, where there are many combinations possible, we would add a new table to the database called Packaging Configuration and assign a Packaging Configuration ID to each version.

- Forms that are related to an existing form but serve a different function/purpose have an alpha after the root number. For example:
 - MV6020 (032004)
 - MN6020A (032004)

Related forms are identified in the database field “Related To”. No separate identifier is needed in the form number.

- Form numbers followed by a dash and a number (e.g. CL361 (112001)-1) use a method developed to illustrate the individual pages of a multi-page form. When encountered, the Analyst should discontinue the dash and number system and replace it with a standard Page 1 of 2, Page 2 of 2 page numbering system.

Multiple-page forms can present a challenge. Of course, we print on the form the Page No and Page of fields. During design, each page may have a separate design file. The ideal way to handle this is to assign each page the same form number with a different Version and show the relationship in the “Related To” field. If all pages are a part of the single design file, it is not necessary to list each page as a Version. If your organization has many forms with many pages, it may be desirable to create a new field in the database to record Page Numbers. The important thing is to be sure each separate design file has a separate Record Number.