



Dealing with time zones

Time zones are confusing and difficult to keep track of, but if you work internationally you can't avoid dealing with them. How do you talk about time when scheduling long-distance calls?

by Kel Barksdale

Talking about time zones

We use the prepositions “ahead of” and “behind” when discussing time zones. London is one hour behind Berlin. Tokyo is fourteen hours ahead of New York. If you're asking someone, you have options:

- What's the time difference between Berlin and Melbourne?
- How many hours apart are Berlin and Melbourne?
- What time zone is Melbourne in?

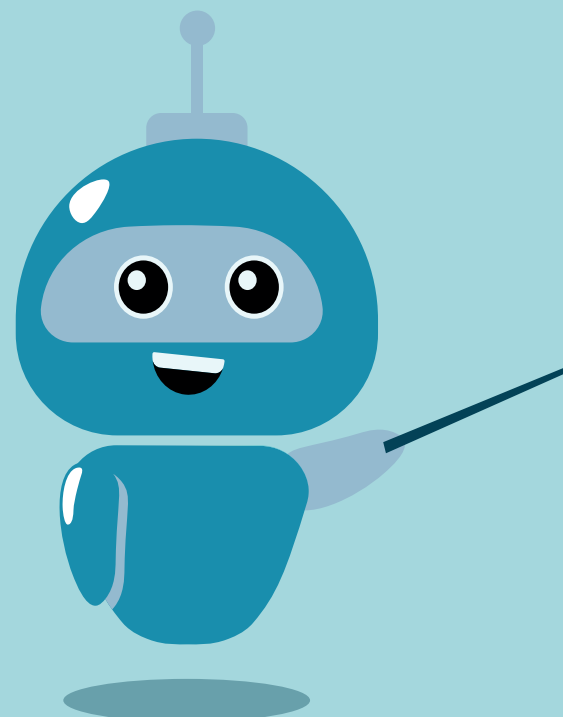
The other person may then respond:

- They're nine hours apart.
- Melbourne is nine hours ahead.
- Berlin is nine hours behind Melbourne.
- Melbourne uses Australian Eastern Standard Time.
- Melbourne time is UTC+10/GMT+10.

UTC and GMT

GMT stands for Greenwich Mean Time. UTC stands for Coordinated Universal Time. They are effectively the same thing: measurements for the distance from the prime meridian, which runs through Greenwich, England.

Two notes: (1) Greenwich is pronounced GREN-itch, not GREEN-witch. (2) You may have noticed the Coordinated Universal Time abbreviates to CUT, not UTC. The order of the letters was a compromise between English and French speakers.





Daylight savings time

Most of my family lives in the eastern US, which is six hours behind Germany. We are all used to this, but although Germany and the US both use daylight savings time in the summer, it doesn't begin and end on the same day in both countries. So there are a few weeks each year where Germany is only five hours ahead.

Daylight savings time is observed in most of Europe and North America, but is uncommon in other parts of the world. DST begins two weeks earlier in North America than it does in Europe, and ends one week later. In the southern hemisphere, Chile, Paraguay, New Zealand, and parts of Australia observe DST during the opposite half of the year. They all begin and end at different times as well. (For an amusing breakdown of time differences, I recommend Tom Scott's video on You-Tube: "The Problem with Time & Timezones – Computerphile." He talks very fast, but there are German subtitles available.)

Measuring time differences

You can often tell whether a particular area is currently in daylight savings time by the time zone abbreviation: ST = Standard Time; DT = Daylight Time. So in the summer, New York uses EDT (Eastern Daylight Time), and in the winter, they use EST (Eastern Standard Time). Alternately, many websites will tell you how many hours different a place is from GMT. To keep using New York as an example, they are in GMT-5 in the winter and GMT-4 in the summer. I recommend the website time.is, which provides up-to-date information on time zones and DST around the world.

International scheduling

Anyone used to calling internationally will understand if you write "CET" (Central European Time) after the hour. However, in my experience, many smaller businesses are not used to long-distance scheduling and struggle to remember that there is a time difference. If you know that a particular contact has had trouble with this in the past, you can do the math for them: "I will call you at 10 a.m. your time."

