Negative Numbers and How We Use Them

KS2 MATHS KS3 MATHS Ages 9-13 ⏰ 3 min read

What Are Negative Numbers?

Negative numbers are numbers less than **zero**. We write them with a **minus sign (−)** in front, like **−5** or **−10**. On a **number line**, they sit to the left of zero, going down: **−1, −2, −3**, and so on, getting smaller the further left you go.

Think of a number line like a ruler standing upright. **Zero** is in the middle. Positive numbers (like **1, 2, 3**) go up above zero. Negative numbers go down below zero.

Think of it like a lift (elevator) in a building. If the ground floor is zero, then floors above ground are positive numbers. Basement levels below ground are negative numbers: **−1, −2, −3** for deeper basements.

When Do We Use Negative Numbers?

Negative numbers appear in real life more often than you might think. Here are some common examples:

Temperature: When it's cold outside, we use negative numbers. If it's **−5 degrees Celsius**, that means it's **5 degrees below freezing**. Freezing point is zero degrees.

Money and Debt: If you owe someone **£10**, you might write that as **−£10**. Your bank account balance can go negative if you spend more money than you have.

Think of it like a game of snakes and ladders. If you start at zero and go backwards, you get negative scores. A score of **−3** means you've gone three spaces back.

Height and Depth: Sea level is considered zero. Mountains above sea level are positive (like **+500 metres**). Places below sea level, like the **Dead Sea**, are shown as negative numbers (like **−430 metres**).

Time and History: Years before the birth of Jesus Christ are written as negative numbers in some systems. We call these **BC** (Before Christ) or **BCE** (Before Common Era).

Working with Negative Numbers

When you add or subtract negative numbers, follow these simple rules: subtracting a negative number is the same as adding a positive number. For example, **5 − (−3)** is the same as **5 + 3 = 8**.

Understanding negative numbers is a superpower in maths because they let us describe the whole world—hot and cold, rich and poor, high and low!