

Dear Steve

My young son James was asking me why we count in tens? I could not think of a reason and I told him it is just one of these things that we do. Can you explain?

Puzzled Mum, Heaton, Newcastle

Dear Puzzled Mum,



The simple answer is history and the fact that we have 10 fingers.

Basic counting started thousands of years ago and then there were only three terms: one, two and many.

As we started farming, we needed to organise and count livestock so we moved on from using our hands to counting on our fingers.

But what do you do once you get to 10? Well, how about using a stone to represent 10?

These two stones and five fingers represent 25.

This system is fine until you reach about 100 – or 10 stones – but beyond that you start to get too many stones.

A series of boxes is the answer. So 42 would be four stones in the 10 box and two stones in the one box.

If you went to Mars and found little green men with just four fingers, how do you think they would count?



Write or email to tell me how a Martian would write down the number 11 to win Chris Budd's book *Mathematics Galore!*, all about the history of numbers. Congratulations to Amy Hoburn, 11, from Benton, for correctly completing last week's puzzle – her answer

was  $9 \times 9 / 9 + 9 - 9 = 9$ .

Do you have a maths question or problem? Write to Dr Maths, Evening Chronicle, Groat Market, Newcastle Upon Tyne, NE1 1ED or email [steve.humble@ncl-coil.ac.uk](mailto:steve.humble@ncl-coil.ac.uk)