

READING ORDNANCE SURVEY MAPS

Ordnance Survey Grid References, or set of map co-ordinates, are commonly printed in guidebooks and magazine articles. A Grid Reference is really a cross-reference made up of two letters giving the code for which map to use, plus a pair of 3-digit directional references. In actual use outdoors, using the full six-figure cross-reference will take you to within 100 metres or yards of the site.

An OS map reference consists mainly of a 6-digit number. For other than local use a 2-letter prefix may also be necessary.

Six-Digit Reference:

1. The 6 digits may be printed either run together (as in "123456") or else divided by a slash (eg "123/456").
2. The first two digits of each pair refer to the pairs of grid numbers printed along the map's borders, identifying the grids or squares. It is possible to have a 4-digit reference number, but this only locates the site to the nearest "square," which may be not be precise enough for a smaller site.
3. Therefore an additional digit is used. This third digit represents an additional fraction (in tenths of a square), allowing you to locate the site precisely within a square. (You can "guesstimate" this fraction or use a metric ruler, ie with tenths marked on it.)
4. The first 3-digit set represents the "Easting reference" and second group, the "Northing reference." Each 3-digit reference thus indicates, to one decimal place i.e 1/10, how far to trace east and then north from the bottom left-hand corner (its axis point).

Example: "123456" would mean you should trace eastward (to your right) from the bottom-left corner of the map over to "12" and then another 3/10, and then trace north (up) to where the map says "45" and then up another 6/10 of a square.

--The formula used to remember which direction comes first is **"along the corridor and up the stairs."**

The Two-Letter Prefix:

1. The more general system is to use just "OS" before the map number, eg "OS 193" printed on the front of the map cover and the index grid on the back.
2. However, you may see another two-letter prefix such as "ST" or "SU." This prefix refers to the the pair of letters overprinted in blue hollow letters **in** the map itself, near all "00" grid numbers. OS maps also have a key on the margin. This prefix is used because OS grid numbers continue off the edge of one map and onto the adjoining one. For marketing reasons, there are different scales of maps, and maps in a series also overlap in their geographical coverage. A 2-letter prefix, e.g. "SY" will appear where the grid-reference numbers printed along the borders, which are limited to a total of 99, run out in the middle of a map, and have to start over at "00." This unique prefix means the same numbers can be used on different maps without confusion.

Example: You can find Pilsdon Pen (the highest point in Dorset) on OS 193 ("Taunton & Lyme Regis") at 412/013. The "northing" reference (013) is near "00" (i.e by square 01), and you will see there is an "ST" overprinted in the map above the "00" dividing line and an "SY" below it. The full reference is thus ST 412013. By means of this prefix, you could also find the same site on any overlapping maps available.