Missing-number subtraction problems

Difficulty level: Easy

Mathematics: Kindergarten to Grade 3

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Overview of the concept

This is how you find the amount that was taken away or the amount you started with, like working out how much money is left after spending some. Subtraction problems with a missing piece show up constantly, because you often know what you started with and what is left, or what is left and what was spent, but not the third number. You use it to check your change, to work out how much you spent, or to find out how much you started with when only the end is known.



Rule

In subtraction, find the missing number with the inverse operation.

If the number taken away is missing, subtract the answer from the starting number. If the starting number is missing, add the number taken away to the answer.

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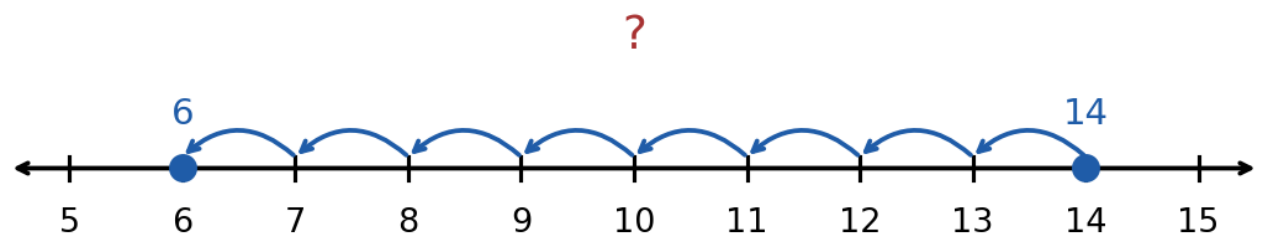
Worked examples

EXAMPLE 1

Q 14 - ? = 6



SOLUTION

You start at 14 and end at 6.

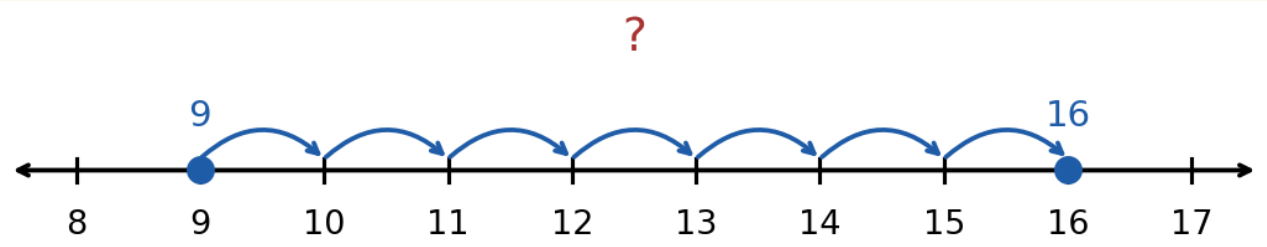
14, 13, 12, 11, 10, 9, 8, 7, 6

That is 8 steps.

So the missing number is 8.

EXAMPLE 2

Q ? - 7 = 9



SOLUTION

You end at 9 after taking away 7.

Add back the 7 you took away: 9 + 7 = 16

So the missing starting number is 16.

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Practice questions

1. You have 10 cookies and eat some. Now you have 4. The number sentence is 10 - ? = 4. What is the missing number?

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2. A bag holds some marbles. 3 marbles are taken out and 8 are left. The number sentence is ? - 3 = 8. What is the missing number?

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3. A box holds 15 crayons. Some are taken out, then 3 more are taken out. Now it holds 9. How many crayons were taken out first?

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4 A group holds some children. 8 children leave, then 2 more leave, and 5 are left. How many children were there at first?

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5 A shelf holds 20 books. Some are taken away. Then 4 more are added back. Now it holds 12. How many books were taken away?

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6 Ana had 20 dollars and spent some. Now she has 13 dollars. How big is the jump back from 20 to 13? That is how much she spent.

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7

The missing number is 11. Which subtraction sentence has 11 as its missing number?

A ? - 5 = 6

B 16 - ? = 6

C 11 - ? = 1

D 15 - ? = 6

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8

Why does 14 - ? = 6 need subtraction to find the missing number, but ? - 6 = 8 needs addition?

A. In 14 - ? = 6 the missing number is a part, so subtract; in ? - 6 = 8 the missing number is the whole, so add

B. In 14 - ? = 6 the missing number is the whole, so add; in ? - 6 = 8 the missing number is a part, so subtract

C. In both sentences the missing number is a part, so subtract in both

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9 Which one has the largest missing number?

A 12 - ? = 5

B ? - 7 = 9

C 18 - ? = 11

D 20 - ? = 12

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10 Which one has a different missing number from the others?

A 10 - ? = 4

B ? - 3 = 3

C 12 - ? = 6

D 9 - ? = 2

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ANSWER KEY

1. 6

2. 11

3. 3

4. 15

5. 12

6. 7

7. ? - 5 = 6

8. In 14 - ? = 6 the missing number is a part, so subtract; in ? - 6 = 8 the missing number is the whole, so add

9. ? - 7 = 9

10. 9 - ? = 2

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