People are slow to claim confidence in undertakings of magnitude.

Ovid
Energy in Everyday Life

Order of Magnitude Estimate

Frank Timmes
ftimmes@asu.edu
What is the circumference of Earth?
Our guidelines for making an order-of-magnitude estimate:

- Guess
- Talk to your gut
- Divide and conquer
- Lie skillfully
- Punt
- Use guerrilla warfare
- Lower your standards
- Cross-check
Its more than 1000 miles but less than 1 million miles, so I’ll guess 50,000 miles.
One possible solution path:
How many time zones are there?
How many miles/time zone?

There are 24 hours in a day, so there are 24 time zones.

I know the flight distance from New York to Los Angeles is ~3,000 miles. These cities are 3 time zones apart, so there is 1000 miles/time zone.

The circumference of the Earth is then 24 time zones x 1000 miles/time zone ~ 24,000 miles ~ 36,000 km.
I know it takes ~15 hours to fly about halfway around the world (Australia) and that commercial planes fly ~ 700 miles/hr.

So the circumference of the Earth is 2 x 15 x 700 ~ 21,000 miles ~ 32,000 km.

This is reassuringly close to my previous estimate and less than a factor of two from my initial guess.