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CONFUSING WORD PAIRS

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While I am admittedly prone to picking apart the written word to make one's writing more accurate, my inner noodle is generally more subdued when it comes to the spoken word. Speech is different than formal writing. First, it's generally more casual: the audience and setting are different. Second, we don't have to consider the rules of proper punctuation when speaking. Fortunately, the physical exchange between the speaker and the listener during speech takes the place of those pesky grammar and punctuation rules.

My general good-humor and acceptance of the relaxed standards of the spoken word do, however, have their limits. Sometimes, the words used are simply incorrect. While this may not confuse the meaning of your message, it may impact your credibility with the listener. For example, I recently got into an argument with my TV after hearing Mercedes's new commercial, the one in which a man announces his car has "*less doors*."

Did I hear that right? "*Less doors*"? Or was it "*Fewer doors*"? Which should it have been? This isn't casual speech — this is a national advertising campaign — and you would think Mercedes might take the time to get it right. Of course, after I got over my initial shock, I took a deep breath and embraced the commercial as inspiration for this month's article. For those of you who share my concern about misuse of confusing word pairs, here are some tips to make fewer mistakes.

Fewer v. Less

To take it easy on Mercedes, this pair is easy to mix-up; both *fewer* and *less* mean the opposite of more. But, it is important to note that they are used in different circumstances.

The basic rule is you use *fewer* with count nouns and *less* with mass nouns. A count noun is something you can count in-



dividually, and it can be plural. We can count the doors on a Mercedes. Therefore, if that commercial had otherwise inspired me to trade in my station wagon in for a convertible, my new car would have *fewer doors*!

Where count nouns are something that can be counted and can be plural, mass nouns are the opposite: they cannot be counted and they cannot be plural.

My station wagon has *less* appeal than that new Mercedes.

You can't quantify the appeal of that new car and you would never make it plural, saying that my new car has many *appeals*.

There are, of course, times when it is difficult to determine if a noun is a mass noun or a count noun. Because I cannot think of an automotive example, we'll go with coffee. If you are in charge of making coffee for a convention and it's nearly over, you would need to make *less* coffee. This is because coffee here is referring to a mass liquid beverage. If you are waiting tables at this convention and it's nearly over, you would need to bring out *fewer* coffees. This is because coffee here really means cups of coffee. Of course, a good tip off here is that the word coffees is plural in the second example, showing that you could count them.

And, like all good English rules, there are a few exceptions. Generally, we use *less* to describe time, money, and distance — even though their specific units of measurement can be counted. The deposition lasted *less* than three hours. I hope to pay *less* than \$1000 for the transcript. He traveled *less* than four blocks before being stopped for erratic driving.

We're going to keep counting, but you can stop worrying about mass and counting nouns. The choice *between* the two prepositions "among and between" depends on how many people or possibilities are involved.

Amount v. Number

To continue with the counting theme, amount and number are also used in different circumstances. Both can mean a quantity, but you use *amount* with mass nouns and *number* with count nouns. The *amount* of interest in this topic is surprising.

The *number* of readers of this article is astounding.

Likewise, the man in the Mercedes commercial is amazed at the *number* of doors on the car.

Among v. Between

We're going to keep counting, but you can stop worrying about mass and counting nouns. The choice *between* the two prepositions "among and between" de-



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depends on how many people or possibilities are involved.

Use *among* when talking about three or more people or things. Use *between* when talking about two people or things.

That Mercedes is *among* the best in its class.

I had to choose *between* buying a new car and replacing my refrigerator.

Between you and me, I'd rather not choose.

(For the grammar lovers out there: Notice that *between* must be followed by pronouns in the objective case: you, me, him, them. The pronoun that follows *between* is always the object of *between*.)

This distinction between *among* and *between* can get a little fuzzy when describing the relationship of a thing to surrounding things both severally and individually. For instance, it is correct to write "The space *between* three points."

Which v. That

This distinction is one most people tend not to notice in speech. Nonetheless, because there is a difference and your meaning can change dramatically depending on which pronoun you use, it's worth spending a few minutes to learn the distinction.

Gear up for some grammar here. Use *which* with nonrestrictive clauses. A nonrestrictive clause adds information that a reader does not need to have to understand the sentence. Use *that* with restrictive clauses. A restrictive clause adds information that a reader must have to understand the sentence. Omitting the information following *that* could confuse the reader.

The victim identified the defendant's car, *which* was a convertible, as the vehicle that hit her.

You will also notice that 'which' is always used with a comma — this also tips you off that the information isn't necessary to the meaning.

The victim identified the defendant's car *that* was a convertible as the vehicle that hit her.

In the first example the defendant has only one car, so the reader doesn't need to know anything more about the car. *Which was a convertible* is not necessary to understand the sentence; it is simply extra information. In the second example, the defendant has two cars, and the victim makes it clear that she was struck by the convertible.

Let's try another example:

The judge read the briefs, *which* are good.

The judge read the briefs *that* are good.

In the first example, the judge read all the briefs and noted their excellence. In the second example the judge didn't read the briefs that were poorly written!

You will also notice that *which* is always used with a comma — this also tips you off that the information isn't necessary to the meaning.

Conclusion

I hope these tips have helped lessen your confusion regarding word pairs and, in the future, I promise to watch fewer TV commercials.

About the Author

Tenielle Fordyce-Ruff is a partner at Rainey Law Office. Her practice focuses on civil appeals. She was a visiting professor at University of Oregon School of Law teaching Legal Research and Writing, Advanced Legal Research, and Intensive Legal Writing and, prior to that, clerked for Justice Roger Burdick of the Idaho Supreme Court. While clerking for Justice Burdick, she authored *Idaho Legal Research*, a book designed to help law students, new attorneys, and paralegals navigate the intricacies of researching Idaho law. You can reach her at tfr@raineylawoffice.com.

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