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Confusing Word Pairs

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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 noodge 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 individually, 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.

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 astounding.

The number of readers of this article is surprising.

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” depends on how many people or possibilities are involved.

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pends 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.

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.

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**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.**

**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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