

also unetymological). It seems to have been used chiefly on the outskirts of mainstream British English, in northern dialects, in Scotland, in Australia and New Zealand; one of our American citations is from an Irish-American milieu, so it may have been used in Irish English too.

"Run out to Mrs. Mullins in the Front Room and ask her for the lend of her brass fender," she cried —Mary Lavin, *Atlantic*, June 1956

". . . Why don't you get the lend of a truck one night. . . ." —Ross Franklyn, in *Coast to Coast: Australian Stories 1946*

**lengthy** *Lengthy* started its career as a usage issue in the late 1700s, when British critics began to attack it as an Americanism. The first record of its use is from about a hundred years earlier. Among the 18th-century American writers who used it were Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Alexander Hamilton, George Washington, and Benjamin Franklin:

An unwillingness to read any thing about them if it appears a little lengthy —Benjamin Franklin, letter, 1773 (OED)

The British first regarded *lengthy* as an unneeded synonym for *long*, but they soon began to use it themselves:

This address . . . was unusually lengthy for him —Charles Dickens, *Pickwick Papers*, 1837 (OED)

Noah Webster included it in his *Compendious Dictionary* of 1806, and it began to appear in English dictionaries by 1835. But it was included in William Cullen Bryant's *Index Expurgatorius* of 1871 and has been subject to unfavorable comment by occasional American commentators for more than a century. Most recent commentators have been more tolerant. A typical opinion can be found in Evans 1957: "*Lengthy* is largely restricted to speeches and writings and carries the reproachful suggestion that they are longer than they need be." Evans' opinion has been more or less repeated by commentators as recently as Garner 1998, although some of them disagree about whether *lengthy* need connote tedious or not.

Our evidence shows that *lengthy* frequently retains its "overlong, tedious" connotations:

They were given lengthy lectures on the importance of neatness and lettering —David Wellman, *Trans-Action*, April 1968

Completion of a lengthy form . . . is often followed by equally lengthy delays —Robin Prestage, *Saturday Rev.*, 1 Jan. 1972

But typically it describes something that is long in a noteworthy way, whether because of

tediousness or, very often, because of comprehensiveness:

. . . embarked upon lengthy studies of all aspects of therapeutic application of X-rays —*Current Biography 1949*

Commission members launched a lengthy probe —Trevor Armbrister, *Saturday Evening Post*, 12 Feb. 1966

. . . to undergo lengthy training in programming —Herbert A. Simon, *Think*, May–June 1967

Our evidence also shows that its use in describing things other than speech and writing is common:

. . . would certainly involve lengthy delays —Richard Eells, "Pacem in Maribus," *A Center Occasional Paper*, June 1970

. . . its lengthy Christmas holidays —Donna Martin, *Change*, Winter 1972–73

Its use in describing physical objects, however, is relatively rare:

He twirled his lengthy key chain —Don Davis, in *The Best from Yank*, 1945

*Lengthy* is a venerable synonym of *long* which has been used by excellent writers for about three centuries. You need not hesitate to use it yourself.

**less, fewer** Here is the rule as it is usually encountered: *fewer* refers to number among things that are counted, and *less* refers to quantity or amount among things that are measured. This rule is simple enough and easy enough to follow. It has only one fault—it is not accurate for all usage. If we were to write the rule from the observation of actual usage, it would be the same for *fewer*: *fewer* does refer to number among things that are counted. However, it would be different for *less*: *less* refers to quantity or amount among things that are measured and to number among things that are counted. Our amended rule describes the actual usage of the past thousand years or so.

As far as we have been able to discover, the received rule originated in 1770 as a comment on *less*:

This Word is most commonly used in speaking of a Number; where I should think *Fewer* would do better. *No Fewer than a Hundred* appears to me not only more elegant than *No less than a Hundred*, but more strictly proper —Baker 1770

Baker's remarks about *fewer* express clearly and modestly—"I should think," "appears to me"—his own taste and preference. It is instructive to compare Baker with one of

the most recent college handbooks in our collection:

*Fewer* refers to quantities that can be counted individually. . . . *Less* is used for collective quantities that are not counted individually . . . and for abstract characteristics —Trimmer & McCrimmon 1988

Notice how Baker's preference has here been generalized and elevated to an absolute status, and his notice of contrary usage has been omitted. This approach is quite common in handbooks and schoolbooks; many pedagogues seem reluctant to share the often complicated facts about English with their students.

How Baker's opinion came to be an inviolable rule, we do not know. But we do know that many people believe it is such. Simon 1980, for instance, calls the "less than 50,000 words" he found in a book about Joseph Conrad a "whopping" error.

The OED shows that *less* has been used of countables since the time of King Alfred the Great—he used it that way in one of his own translations from Latin—more than a thousand years ago (in about 888). So essentially *less* has been used of countables in English for just about as long as there has been a written English language. After about 900 years Robert Baker opined that *fewer* might be more elegant and proper. Almost every usage writer since Baker has followed Baker's lead, and generations of English teachers have swelled the chorus. The result seems to be a fairly large number of people who now believe *less* used of countables to be wrong, though its standardness is easily demonstrated.

In present-day written usage, *less* is as likely as or more likely than *fewer* to appear in a few common constructions. One of the most frequent is the *less than* construction where *less* is a pronoun. The countables in this construction are often distances, sums of money, units of time, and statistical enumerations, which are often thought of as amounts rather than numbers. Some examples:

The odometer showed less than ten thousand miles —E. L. Doctorow, *Loon Lake*, 1979

. . . he had somewhat less than a million to his name when he went to Washington —David Halberstam, *Harper's*, February 1971

I was never in Europe for less than fourteen months at a time —James Thurber, letter, 18 July 1952

Her agency, less than 5 years old, is a smashing success —Donald Robinson, *Ladies' Home Jour.*, January 1971

. . . an allied people, today less than 50,000 in number —W. B. Lockwood, *A Panorama of Indo-European Languages*, 1972

". . . I've known you less than twenty-four hours. . . ." —Agatha Christie, *Why Didn't They Ask Evans?*, 1934

*Fewer* can be used in the same constructions, but it appears less often than *less*. It is sometimes used in such a way as to make one suspect that an editor rather than a writer is responsible for the *fewer*.

. . . has never gained fewer than 1,222 yards in a season —Rick Telander, *Sports Illustrated*, 5 Sept. 1984

Some contemporary usage writers concede that this use of *less* is acceptable.

The *no less than* construction noticed by Baker tends still to have *less* more often than *fewer*:

The class of 1974 . . . included no less than 71 new Democrats —Tip O'Neill with William Novak, *Man of the House*, 1987

It is spoken by no less than 100 millions in Bengal and bordering areas —W. B. Lockwood, *A Panorama of Indo-European Languages*, 1972

*Less* is the usual choice in the "twenty-five words or less" construction:

. . . readers are encouraged to keep their comments to 500 words or less —*Change*, January–February 1971

. . . of all the millions of families in the country, two out of three consist of only three persons or less —Mark Abrams, *London Calling*, 9 Oct. 1952

. . . and now know enough to create little fictions that in 30 seconds or less get right to the heart of desire itself —Mark Crispin Miller, *Johns Hopkins Mag.*, Winter 1984

Kilpatrick 1984 defends this *less* and the one just above. *Less* is also frequent when it follows a number:

. . . almost \$10 million less than for 1969 —*Annual Report, Borg-Warner Corp.*, 1970

Many bulls fought in Madrid weigh 100 kilos less —Tex Maule, *Sports Illustrated*, 29 July 1968

. . . at thirty-three on my part, and few years less on yours —Lord Byron, letter, 17 Nov. 1821

And of course it follows *one*:

. . . one less scholarship —Les A. Schneider, letter to the editor, *Change*, September 1971

One less reporter —Don Cook, *Saturday Rev.*, 24 June 1978

*Less* is also frequently used to modify ordinary plural count nouns. In present-day English this usage appears to be more common in speech (and reported speech) than it is in discursive writing. It is likely that some of the plural nouns in the examples were thought of as uncountable amounts rather than numbers.

. . . Goldsmith took less pains than Pope . . . to create images of luxury in the reader's mind —John Butt, *English Literature in the Mid-Eighteenth Century*, edited & completed by Geoffrey Carnall, 1979

. . . Americans pay less taxes than most of the inhabitants of developed countries —Robert Lekachman, quoted in *Center Mag.*, January–February 1970

The less sodium you consume, the less drugs you're likely to need —Jane E. Brody, *N.Y. Times*, 11 July 1979

You have to make less mistakes —Victor Temkin, quoted in *N.Y. Times*, 4 May 1980

. . . lower rates . . . lazy days, and less crowds —L. Dana Gatilin, *Christian Science Monitor*, 23 Oct. 1979

Less people exercise their right to vote —William Scranton, quoted in *Celebrity*, October 1976

Uses such as the above, even those where *fewer* might have been more elegant, have been standard for more than a millennium. If you are a native speaker, your use of *less* and *fewer* can reliably be guided by your ear. If you are not a native speaker, you will find that the simple rule with which we started is a safe guide, except for the constructions for which we have shown *less* to be preferred.

**lesser** 1. Samuel Johnson in his 1755 dictionary aspersed the formation of *lesser* as a "barbarous corruption" because he considered it a double comparative (see DOUBLE COMPARISON). *Less* does serve as a comparative of *little*, and it did so in Middle English when *lesser* was formed. Whoever coined *lesser* seems to have considered *less* not a comparative of *little*, but an independent adjective meaning "unimportant." At any rate Johnson recognized that the irregularity of its formation had had no effect on its literary use; he presents citations from Spenser, Shakespeare, Bishop Burnet, John Locke, and Pope. But many 19th-century grammarians pruned Johnson's remarks down to the "barbarous corruption" part, omitting his mitigating comments, and then lumped *lesser* with *badder*, *gooder*, and *worser*. This treatment created a usage problem that sputtered through the 19th century and died out.

Though its propriety was a 19th-century issue, *lesser* still appears in handbooks, usually paired with *less*. The handbooks tend to hold that *lesser* is used to indicate a difference in value or importance. The observation is broadly correct:

. . . would have turned any lesser man to madness or suicide —Robert Graves, *New Republic*, 21 Mar. 1955

The discussion has been confined so far to the lesser ode, but most poets attempted the greater ode as well —John Butt, *English Literature in the Mid-Eighteenth Century*, edited & completed by Geoffrey Carnall, 1979

It is also used of numerical quantities in contexts where *smaller* or *lower* is more usual:

So \$1 million a day would be taken out for each day they bargain. They would be bargaining for a lesser amount each day —Peter Ueberroth, quoted in *Springfield (Mass.) Morning Union*, 2 Aug. 1985

It is also used of size. Such use was more common in the past than it is now; most present-day use for size is confined to names of plants and animals like *lesser celandine* or *lesser yellowlegs*.

. . . offered to share the booty, and having divided the money into two unequal heaps, and added a golden snuff-box to the lesser heap, he desired Mr. Wild to take his choice —Henry Fielding, *Jonathan Wild*, 1743

2. The adverb *lesser* raises an occasional question too. Shakespeare used it several times in his plays. In present-day use it is limited to modifying past participles—especially *known*—to which it may or may not be joined by a hyphen.

The lesser known is the epitaph on Ben Franklin's tombstone —Harper 1985

. . . the lesser-known places within America's National Park System —Horace Sutton, *Saturday Rev.*, 14 Apr. 1979

**lest** This conjunction is almost always followed by a verb in the subjunctive mood:

It is an idea that cannot safely be compromised with, lest it be utterly destroyed —E. B. White, letter, 29 Nov. 1947

Lest there be any doubt —Alan M. Der-showitz, *N.Y. Times Book Rev.*, 26 June 1983

. . . to be very wary lest one become an accomplice —Robert Stone, quoted in *Publishers Weekly*, 21 Mar. 1986

It can also be followed by a *should* clause, a construction that seems to have been more common in the past than it is now: