

# Word for Word

## Between *among* and *between*



Many people have been taught to use *between* to talk about two things and *among* to talk about three or more things. But the precise use of *between* and *among* follows a more nuanced rule.

*The Chicago Manual of Style* explains the difference between the two words:

*Between* indicates one-to-one relationships {between you and me}. *Among* indicates undefined or collective relationships {honor among thieves}. *Between* has long been recognized as being perfectly appropriate for more than two objects if multiple one-to-one relationships are understood from the context {trade between members of the European Union}.

In other words, *between* is suitable to indicate a relationship involving two or more things in which each thing is considered in relation to each of the other things, whereas *among* is the better

choice to indicate the relationship of one thing to a group, especially when emphasizing a distribution.

Therefore, the following sentence is not entirely precise:

Median survival times were compared among the three groups.

In this sentence, the median survival time of each group is being compared with the median survival time of each other group, so *between* is the better choice:

Median survival times were compared between the three groups.

Here are more examples:

Imprecise: Radiotracer uptake differed significantly among cancer cell types.

Confusing: The child stood between 100 pigeons.

Clear: The needle was lost among the stalks of hay.

Clear: The rate of complete response was higher among patients with the target mutation.

Clear: The exosomes facilitated communication between the cancer cells, the immune cells, and the blood vessels.

In practice, these two words are sometimes used interchangeably, and the message may remain understandable; still, maintaining this distinction will help you avoid unclear, imprecise, and even nonsensical constructions that can come about from the rule based on a simple count.

## **Bibliography**

*AMA Manual of Style*, 11th ed. New York, NY: Oxford University Press; 2020:510

*The Chicago Manual of Style*, 17th ed. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press; 2017:314.

*Between vs. Among: Usage Guide*. Among. Merriam-Webster. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/among#usage-1>. Accessed April 19, 2021.

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