

Word for Word

A few ways to indicate how many



In English, several terms or phrases indicate quantity when an exact number is not available or is not important. In fact, the previous sentence used one: *several*. Others include *many* and *few*. Although these terms are purposefully inexact, it is important to be thoughtful about which term you choose so that a reader understands your intention.

Many indicates “a large but indefinite number.”¹

Examples:

Many of the patients recovered after receiving second-line therapy.
This treatment has been tested in many hospitals.

Several has a similar meaning to *many* but indicates a smaller amount: “more than two but fewer than many.”²

Examples:

Several of the patients reported feeling fatigued after the treatment was administered.

Several studies have reported findings similar to ours.

Few indicates “only a small number.”³

Example:

Few studies have examined this topic.

Although *few* is an adjective in the example above, it is a noun when used in the phrase *a few*, and this phrase has a subtly different meaning from *few*. The phrase *a few* shifts the focus from the small number of items to the characteristics of those items.

Example:

Few patients recovered from the illness after receiving the treatment, and a few of these individuals who recovered later experienced a relapse of symptoms.

In addition, an adjective can be added to the phrase *a few* to make its meaning more specific.⁴

Examples:

A select few studies have examined this topic; we review those results here.

An unlucky few patients experienced serious side effects, which included hypertension, neuropathy, and thrombocytopenia.

References

1. Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary. 2021. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/many>. Accessed August 18, 2021.
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3. Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary. 2021. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/few>. Accessed August 18, 2021.
4. Fowler HW. *Modern English Usage*, 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press; 1965:197.

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