

Word for Word

Fewer or less?

Fewer and *less* are both adjectives that refer to a smaller amount of something (*fewer* is defined as “a smaller number of persons or things”¹ and *less* as “constituting a more limited number or amount”²). However, the two words are not interchangeable. *Fewer* should be used with countable nouns, and *less* should be used with uncountable nouns.

As the name suggests, countable nouns are those that can be counted; they have singular and plural forms (e.g., *one kitten* versus *several kittens*). Uncountable nouns cannot be counted and are treated as singular; they include some abstract concepts (e.g., *honesty*) and measurements of volume, mass, and proportion (e.g., *water*, *time*, and *furniture*). Note that the word *data* is considered countable (i.e., *fewer data*, not *less data*).³



Examples:

Fewer independent risk factors were identified on multivariate analysis.

We removed all peptides with fewer than seven amino acids.

After isolation, samples were stored at 4 °C for fewer than 7 days or frozen at -80 °C.

Americans are eating more chicken and less beef and pork.

Although the importance of the long-term effects of cancer treatment is now

evident, this topic receives less attention because of the focus on the acute effects of chemo-radiation therapy.

References

1. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/fewer>
2. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/less>
3. <https://www.amamanualofstyle.com/view/10.1093/jama/9780190246556.001.0001/med-9780190246556-chapter-9-div1-10?rskey=4UMsSI&result=1>

--Ann Sutton

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