

## Few, little, less, fewer

Reminder → 147–152

A

We often use (a) **few** and (a) **little** with nouns. However, we can also use them as pronouns:

- It is a part of the world visited by **few**. (= few people)
- Do you want a chocolate? There's still **a few** left. (= a few chocolates)
- Little** is known about the painter's early life.
- 'Do you know anything about car engines?' '**A little**.' (= I know a little about car engines)

Note that **quite a few** means 'quite a large number':

- She's been away from work for **quite a few** weeks.

B

We can use **the few** and **the little** followed by a noun to suggest 'not enough' when we talk about a group of things or people (with **few**) or part of a group or amount (with **little**):

- It's one of **the few** shops in the city centre where you can buy food.
- We should use **the little** time we have available to discuss Jon's proposal.

Instead of **the few / little** we can use **what few / little** to mean 'the small (number / amount)':

- She gave **what little** money she had in her purse to the man. (*or ... the little money ...*)
- What few** visitors we have are always made welcome. (*or The few visitors ...*)

Note that we can also say 'She gave **what / the little** she had ...' and '**What / The few** we have ...' when it is clear from the context what is being referred to.

We can use **few** (but rarely **little**) after personal pronouns (**my, her**, etc.) and **these** and **those**:

- I learned to play golf during **my few** days off during the summer.
- These few** miles of motorway have taken over ten years to build.

C

In speech and informal writing, we use **not many / much** or **only / just ... a few / little** to talk about a small amount or number, and we often use **a bit (of)** instead of **a little**:

- Sorry I haven't finished, I **haven't** had **much** time today. (*rather than ... I had little time ...*)
- I won't be long. I've **only** got **a few** things to get. (*rather than ... I've got few things ...*)
- Want **a bit** of chocolate? (*rather than ... a little chocolate?*)

In more formal contexts, such as academic writing, we generally prefer **few** and **little**:

- The results take **little** account of personal preference. (*rather than ... don't take much ...*)

D

**Less (than) and fewer (than)**

We use **less** with uncountable nouns and **fewer** with plural countable nouns:

- You should eat **less pasta**.
- There are **fewer cars** on the road today.

**Less** is sometimes used with a plural countable noun (e.g. ... **less cars** ...), particularly in conversation. However, this is grammatically incorrect.

We use **less than** with a noun phrase indicating an amount and **fewer than** with a noun phrase referring to a group of things or people:

- I used to earn **less than a pound a week** when I first started work.
- There were **fewer than 20 students** at the lecture. (*or informally ... less than ...; but note that some people think this use of 'less than' is incorrect*)

When we talk about a distance or a sum of money we use **less than**, not **fewer than**:

- The beach is **less than** a mile away.

To emphasise that a number is surprisingly large we can use **no less than** or **no fewer than**:

- The team has had **no fewer than** ten managers in just five years. (*or ... no less than ...*)

Note that we prefer **no less than** with percentages, periods of time and quantities:

- Profits have increased by **no less than** 95% in the last year. (*rather than ... no fewer than ...*)

# Exercises

**52.1** Complete the sentences with **(a) few, (a) little, the few, the little, what few or what little**, giving alternatives where possible. **A & B**

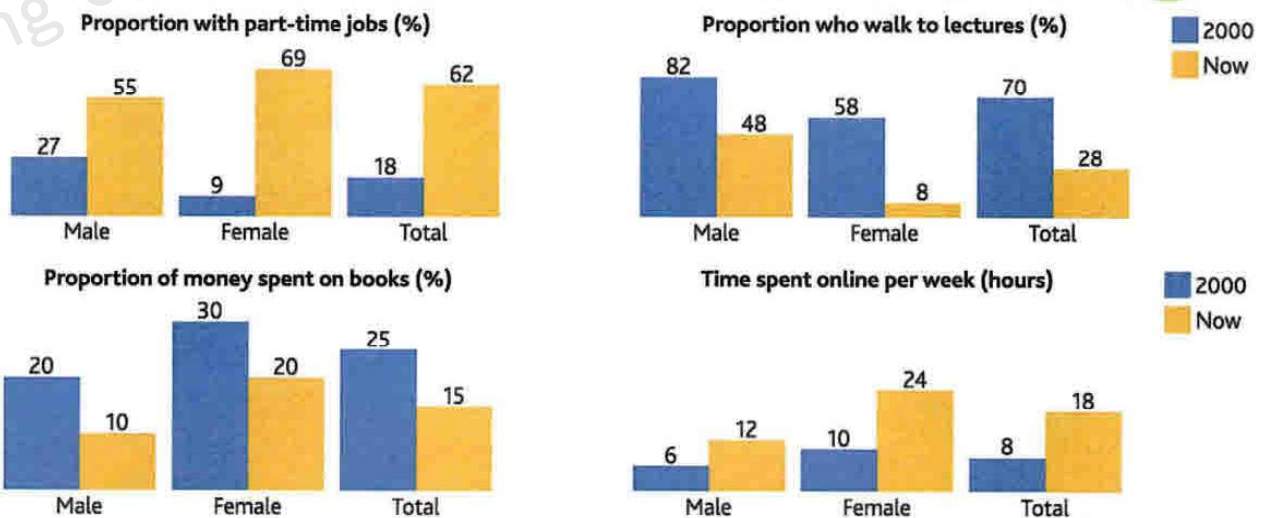
- 1 Thomas was named sportsperson of the year, and ..... would disagree.
- 2 ..... remains of the old castle walls except the Black Gate.
- 3 She called her ..... remaining relatives together and told them she was leaving.
- 4 Simpson is among ..... foreign journalists allowed into the country.
- 5 A: Has my explanation helped? B: ....., yes.
- 6 ..... belongings she had were packed into a small suitcase.
- 7 Maya hasn't been looking well recently, and I'm ..... worried about her.
- 8 A: Have there been many applications for the job? B: Yes, quite .....
- 9 The children weren't well so I had to take ..... days off.
- 10 I don't have much money, but I'm happy to lend you ..... I have.

**52.2** Suggest changes to the italicised text in these examples from conversations (1–4) and from academic writing (5–8). **C**

- 1 A: Did you do anything last night? B: I just watched *a little* TV and then went to bed.
- 2 Take some sweets if you want, although *there are few* left.
- 3 I've tried to help her, but *there's little more* I can do.
- 4 See that old car over there? *There's few like that* left now.

- 5 The country *hasn't had many* female politicians since independence.
- 6 It is thought that the two leaders *didn't exchange many words* on their first meeting.
- 7 Teachers were found to be *a bit more confident* after the extra training.
- 8 *There doesn't seem to be much prospect* of ever recovering the missing manuscript.

**52.3** A survey of British university students was conducted in 2000 and recently repeated. Some of the results are given below. Comment on them in sentences using **fewer (than)** or **less (than)**. **D**



- 1 Proportion with part-time jobs (%)  
*Fewer students had a part-time job in 2000 than now.*
- 2 Proportion of money spent on books (%)
- 3 Proportion who walk to lectures (%)
- 4 Time spent online per week (hours)

Are there any results that surprise you? Comment on them using **no less than** or **no fewer than**.