



Video 11 – Real Vocabulary: when do you use the words *less* and *fewer*?

Hi there! When to use *less* and when to use *fewer* has been a controversial issue for a long time.

Let's look at a couple of examples:

"There are *less* cars in Paris than there were two years ago."

"There are *fewer* cars in Paris than there were two years ago."

Which of these is correct?

The traditional rule is that you use *less* with uncountable nouns (like *traffic*, *rain*, or *trouble*) and *fewer* when referring to things you can count (like *cars*, *showers*, or *problems*). But it's not always that simple. For example, we're much more likely to say "the journey takes *less* than 2 hours" than "fewer than 2 hours", or "people with incomes of \$500 or *less*" (rather than "\$500 or fewer"). In any case, this distinction has only been in place since the late 1700s – before that, there's plenty of evidence of writers using *less* with countable nouns.

In frequency terms, *fewer* is still the preferred choice when we're talking about countable nouns like *cars*. But it's probably better to see this as a stylistic choice rather than a question of right or wrong: *fewer* – the traditionally correct usage – sounds a little more formal than *less*, so it would be more appropriate in formal speech or writing. But in most contexts, either of the sentences would be equally acceptable.

If you'd like to know more about this topic or other real vocabulary questions, have a look at macmillandictionary.com.