

Few vs little: not enough

CEFR A2-B1 · 20 questions · A4 / US Letter

Without the little word a, both phrases turn negative: few things and little stuff are not enough.

The rule

The four forms and their feeling

- A few plus countable plural: a small number, and enough. "I have a few minutes."
- Few plus countable plural: not many, and not enough. "Few people came, so the room felt empty."
- A little plus uncountable noun: a small amount, and enough. "There is a little rice."
- Little plus uncountable noun: not much, and not enough. "There is little rice, so we need to shop."

Countable and uncountable one more time

- Countable nouns can be numbered and take a plural: a mistake, two mistakes, few mistakes.
- Uncountable nouns cannot be numbered: information, money, time, hope, interest. They take little.
- A countable plural stands directly after few: few seats, few shops, few chances.
- An uncountable noun stands directly after little: little time, little hope, little money.

Where the negative feeling comes from

- Few and little compare the amount with what is needed, and the answer is "not enough".
- "Few tickets were left" explains why we could not all go.
- "Little information is available" explains why the report is short.
- The words also appear in formal writing, where they mean "not many people or things do this": "Few students read the whole book before the class."

Only, very, quite and the

- Only few is unusual; use only a few when you mean a small number: "Only a few tickets are left."
- Very few and very little make the shortage stronger: "Very few people came", "very little time".
- Quite a few means a large number, and quite a little sounds clumsy. Use quite a lot of instead: "quite a lot of work".
- The few and the little point to a specific small group or amount: "The few friends I have are loyal."

Verbs and sentence patterns

- Both phrases take a plural verb when they act as the subject with a plural noun: "Few students were ready."
- With an uncountable noun, the verb is singular: "Little time is left."
- "There is" or "there are" follows the noun: "There are few jobs", "There is little bread."
- In questions, the negative form is rare. Use any or much/many instead: "Are there any tickets?"

Questions

Write your answer on the line under each question. Check your work with the answer key on the last page.

1. There are ___ seats left; the hall is almost full.

2. We have ___ time; hurry up!

3. ___ students answered correctly, so the test was hard.

4. There is ___ hope of finding the missing boat before dark.

5. She has ___ friends here, so she often feels lonely.

6. He earns ___ money, so he cannot afford a car.

7. ___ people came, so the event was cancelled.

8. We had ___ difficulty with the project, so we finished early.

9. There were ___ tickets, so we could not all go.

10. I speak ___ German, not enough for a conversation.

11. There is ___ milk left, so we can still have tea.

12. ___ children were playing outside because of the cold.

13. I have ___ energy today, so I will rest.

14. He has ___ interest in sport.

15. There are ___ shops open at this hour, so buy food now.

16. We have ___ minutes, so let us have a quick coffee.

17. Quite a ___ people came to the opening.

18. There is very ___ chance of rain today.

19. ___ of my friends like camping, so I usually go alone.

20. Would you like ___ more cake?

Answer key

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1. **few** — Seats is a countable plural, and the shortage takes few.
2. **little** — Time is uncountable, so the shortage takes little.
3. **Few** — Students is a countable plural, and the negative meaning takes Few.
4. **little** — Hope is uncountable, and the sentence reports a shortage: little hope.
5. **few** — The loneliness shows the number is not enough, so the negative few is correct.
6. **little** — Money is uncountable, and the shortage takes little.
7. **Few** — People is a countable plural, and the cancelled event shows the number was not enough: Few.
8. **little** — Difficulty is uncountable, and not much difficulty is the positive meaning of little.
9. **few** — Tickets is a countable plural, so the shortage takes few.
10. **little** — German as a language amount is uncountable, so the shortage takes little.
11. **a little** — The milk is enough for tea, so the positive a little is correct.
12. **Few** — Children is a countable plural, and the cold explains the small number: Few.
13. **little** — Energy is uncountable, and the shortage takes little.
14. **little** — Interest is uncountable, so the lack of it takes little.
15. **few** — Shops is a countable plural, so the shortage takes few.
16. **a few** — Minutes is a countable plural, and the time is enough for coffee, so a few is correct.
17. **few** — Quite a few means a surprisingly large number, which fits a busy opening.
18. **little** — Chance is uncountable here, and very little makes the shortage stronger.
19. **Few** — Few of appears before my, and the negative meaning explains the solo trips.
20. **a little** — An offer of a small amount takes the positive a little: a little more cake.