Fewer Grammatical Errors Means Less Editing

Mark B. Mycyk, MD

Boston Medical Center, Boston, MA and Toxikon Consortium, Chicago, IL

The words “fewer” and “less” are commonly confused and misused in everyday speech and in writing. Use the word “fewer” when items can be counted individually; use “less” when a quantity cannot be counted.

Incorrect: If *less* than two tablets were ingested, the poison center recommends keeping the child at home.

Correct: If *fewer* than two tablets were ingested, the poison center recommends keeping the child at home.

A related error involves misuse of the words “number” and “amount.” Use the word “number” when something can be counted individually; use “amount” when something cannot be counted.

Example #1 (correct): In the resuscitation room, a large *number* of tablets were evacuated from the patient’s stomach during the gastric lavage procedure.

Example #2 (correct): A small *amount* of green fluid remained in the bottle of antifreeze found next to the patient’s bed.