



Ms. Particular Presents: Amount vs Number

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In English, a distinction is made between mass nouns (which name things that are indivisible, such as *water* or *ingenuity*) and countable nouns (which name things that come in discrete units, such as *leptons* or *students*).

A special class of mass nouns denotes indeterminate aggregations of things that may be countable but are treated as a single group, such as *jargon*, *research*, or *literature*. These mass nouns are usually treated as singular in US English usage, even though they may encompass many items, and thus take a singular verb.

While choosing the incorrect word (less vs fewer, amount vs number) to go with a noun may not affect the meaning of your sentence, it sounds sloppy.

**“Amount” is used with mass* nouns;
“number” is used with countable nouns**

**Use “amount of” for quantities that have been
measured or calculated**

**“A trace amount of S was shown to greatly alter
surface mass transport on Cu(111).”**

**Use “number of” for quantities that have been
counted**

**“A large number of studies have generated
conflicting results.”**

(Ms. P deploras “a large number,” too [10, 50, 100, 1000??]; why not simply tell the reader, “It’s a whole bunch, but I’m too lazy to look it up”?)

*cannot be divided into discreet units; unquantizable

Examples of recent *Phys. Rev.* papers that use the incorrect word in the **title**:

“Suppressing epidemics with a limited amount of immunization units.”

(*units* are counted; should be number of immunization units)

“Quantum, classical, and total amount of correlations in a quantum state.”

(*correlations* are counted; should be number of correlations)

“Raman study on defective graphene: Effect of the excitation energy, type, and amount of defects.” (*defects* are counted; should be number of defects)

And permanently enshrined in Ms. P’s hall of shame:

“There is a large amount of literature on this topic, and a reader could do a lot worse than refer to Bell’s original papers [1].” [quoted verbatim from a *PRL*!]

And while we're on the subject...

Mass nouns	Countable nouns
amount	number
less than	fewer than
as much as	as many as

use the correct modifier