

Q. Can the word *both* apply to more than two nouns in a list? I keep seeing it used with three or more, by newspaper journalists and on television. Today one reporter made this comment: “Both the city, the county, and the state of Florida apply luxury taxes to (certain) items.”

A. The word *both* is improper in that statement. To emphasize the inclusion of all three entities, the reporter should have said, “The city, the county, and the state of Florida all apply luxury taxes to (certain) items.” The incorrect usage is now frequent, but it is still ungrammatical. *Both*, as an adjective and as a pronoun, by definition and by usage, refers to two items only. It has had a long and respectable history, appearing in Middle English and earlier in Old Norse and Old High German. In Middle English it was spelled *bothe*; Chaucer uses it in “The Canterbury Tales” and it also appears in other Middle English works.

Dictionaries currently define *both* with its original meaning: “one and the other, relating to, or being two in conjunction,” as in, “We were both present.” *Both* also means “alike” in coordinated phrases like “both men and women” and “both ready and willing.” It underscores that the activity denoted by a verb applies equally to two entities; for example, “Both employees earned \$500” emphasizes that each employee earned that amount.

Authorities point out that, if the statement applies only to two entities, it is illogical to say, for example, “The books are both alike.” (Neither could be “alike” without the other.) Similarly, it is illogical to say, “They both appeared together” or “Both of them accused each other.” And, in the possessive form, “the parents of both children” is preferable to “both children’s parents.”

The error of including more than two items after the word *both* resembles a similar error in the use of *between*. A National Public Radio journalist recently erred when he announced on his news broadcast, “No agreement has been reached between the countries of China, North Korea, South Ko-

rea, and India.” The reporter should have used the preposition *among*. By definition and by long tradition, the preposition *between* can apply only to two entities. It came into English during the Old English period as a prefix (*be*, meaning “by”) and *tweonum* (“by the two”). During the Middle English period, *tweonum* evolved into *twain*, as in Rudyard Kipling’s famous line, “Never the ‘twain shall meet.”

As with *both*, the preposition *between* is redundant when language in your sentence repeats that idea. “He took a lunch break between each and every appointment” is incorrect; instead, say, “He took a lunch break between appointments” or “He took a lunch break after every appointment.” (However, the ungrammatical phrase, “Between you and me and the light post,” is idiomatic and jocular.)

Like *both* and *between*, comparative adjectives can apply only to two persons or entities. To compare two sisters, use the comparative adjective ending in *-er*: “She is the taller of the sisters.” Don’t say (though many do), “She is the tallest sister.” Only if there are three or more sisters can you say, “She is the tallest sister.” In deciding between two choices, choose the *better* one, not the *best* one.

And how many horns has a dilemma? Only two, because by definition a dilemma forces you to choose between two equally balanced alternatives.

From the Mailbag

Several readers have responded to the “Language for Lawyers” column about the use of “Esquire” or “Esq.,” which appeared in the January issue. Attorney Roberto Marquez, who is not a native English speaker, writes that there is no exact equivalent in Puerto Rico, where he lives. He says that the word *abogado* is the word for “law-

yer,” but that is not used to designate lawyers. Instead, people use the word *licenciado* (literally “licensed”), usually abbreviated to *Lcdo.*, so that he would be identified as “Roberto Marquez, Lcdo.”

In all other Latin American countries, Mr. Marquez adds, lawyers are called “Doctor” and are referred to with much more respect than they are in the United States. But he agrees with William Safire that adding either *Esq.* or *Lcdo.* is a way of “seeking to assert importance or status.”

Other correspondents differed. One woman attorney wrote that she considers the title *Esq.* as “somehow nicer than adding initials to your name” (as in Susie Smith, MS, JD). She added that to add “Lawyer” to one’s name, as some suggest, “is the same as wearing boots and a plaid shirt with your business suit.” And to add no designation fails to indicate the profession of the individual. But she agrees that a lawyer’s handwritten signature should be unadorned.

This subject always generates discussion and disagreement. If you have some comments to add, send them in.

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