

Usage of "Times"
Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of English Usage

times

... but now I am resolved to drink ten times less than before —Jonathan Swift, *Journal to Stella*, 30 July 1711

This is the *times* that tries men's souls. Such commentators as Evans 1957, Bernstein 1962, Copperud 1970, and Kilpatrick 1984 have argued that *times* should not be used in comparing that which is less (as in size, frequency, distance, or strength) to that which is greater. The essence of their argument is that since *times* has to do with multiplication it should only be used in comparing the greater to the smaller (as in "ten times as many" or "three times as strong"). Instead of saying "ten times less," "three times closer," and "five times fainter," you should say "one-tenth as much," "one-third as far," and "one-fifth as bright." So goes the argument. It has, undoubtedly, a certain mathematical logic to it, and it may therefore seem intimidatingly persuasive to the nonmathematical (among whose ranks we may safely expect to find most usage commentators). There is a good reason for rejecting it, however. It is that mathematics and language are two different things: attempting to apply mathematical logic to the study and understanding of language is, in fact, illogical (and usually unproductive into the bargain). The question to be asked concerning such a construction as *ten times less* is not whether it makes sense mathematically, but whether it makes sense linguistically—that is, whether people understand what it means. The answer to that question is obviously yes. *Times* has now been used in such constructions for about 300 years, and there is no evidence to suggest that it has ever been misunderstood.

Men who had ten or twenty times less to remember —W. E. Gladstone, *Gleanings of Past Years*, 1879 (OED)

... said that present day anesthetics are seven times less toxic than cocaine —*Chicago Sunday Tribune*, 23 Feb. 1947

... sensitive to lights hundreds of times weaker than the lights they could respond to initially —Howard H. Kendler, *Basic Psychology*, 2d ed., 1968

... found that it was 1,000 times less abundant than ATP —Ira Pastan, *Scientific American*, August 1972

... they are almost a thousand times smaller —Roger Lewin, *Saturday Rev.*, 26 Jan. 1974

But the controversy does not end there. Many of the commentators who object to *times less* also object—for an entirely different reason—to *times more*. The argument in this case is that *times more* (or *times larger*, *times stronger*, *times brighter*, etc.) is ambiguous, so that "He has five times more money than you" can be misunderstood as meaning "He has six times as much money as you." It is, in fact, possible to misunderstand *times more* in this way, but it takes a good deal of effort. If you have \$100, five times that is \$500, which means that "five times more than \$100" can mean (the commentators claim) "\$500 more than \$100," which equals "\$600," which equals "six times as much as \$100." The commentators regard this as a serious ambiguity, and they advise you to avoid it by always saying "times as much" instead of "times more." Here again, it seems that they are paying homage to mathematics at the expense of language. The fact is that "five times more" and "five times as much" are idiomatic phrases which

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have—and are understood to have—exactly the same meaning. The "ambiguity" of *times more* is imaginary; in the world of actual speech and writing, the meaning of *times more* is clear and unequivocal. It is an idiom that has existed in our language for more than four centuries, and there is no real reason to avoid its use.

This might you reade, and ten times more
In the Bible
—Robert Crowley, *Pleasure and Payne*, 1551
(OED)

... tho' it be five times larger than the other —
Joseph Addison, *The Spectator*, 1712 (OED)

... as much as 10 times more quickly —David
Hamilton, *New Scientist*, 13 Feb. 1969

... faces the mirror three times more often —Gor-
don G. Gallup, Jr., *Psychology Today*, March 1971

... approximately thirty-five times more active —
Lawrence Locke, *The Lamp*, Summer 1971

For *times* in formulas like *two times two*, see TWO AND TWO.

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