
A question from Samad from Iran:

Dear Sirs, could you please explain the difference in usage of *approximately*, *roughly*, *about*, *nearly*? Many thanks in advance.

Samantha Hague answers:

Hi Samad. I wonder why you asked this question – are you by any chance writing a report?! All of the words you list above are adverbs which describe a quantity or variation in quantity. Well, these words are known as *degree adverbs* and one of the differences between the words you mention is their degree of formality, which would affect the times you use them.

Approximately, *about*, *nearly* and *roughly* are most usually used to modify measurements or quantities. And I'm going to start with the adverb which is more formal in tone, which is *approximately*. Just listen to these examples:

Approximately half of the residents in the survey stated that they agreed with the government's plan to reduce traffic in the city centre.

Police say that the main suspect charged in the case escaped from custody approximately twelve days ago.

I think Samad, you'll realise that these examples could be part of an academic paper or an official report. It's not impossible to use *approximately* in speech, but you'd be far more likely to use *roughly*, *nearly* or *about* in everyday situations and the rest of my explanation will look at the use of these three adverbs.

Jane told me that she spends nearly one-third of her salary on rent.

I guess there'll be roughly thirty people going to the party tonight.

Because the traffic was bad, it took about four hours to get to my aunt's house.

By about five o'clock, the library was deserted.

It's possible to interchange *roughly* and *about* in each of these four sentences with the same meaning. *About* can be confusing for learners when they first see it as a degree adverb, because they're familiar with its use in prepositional phrases, such as

Books and newspapers were spread about all over the room.

Nearly is slightly different to *roughly* and *about*, because *nearly* means 'almost', or 'not quite'. So, if Jane spends *nearly* one-third of her salary on rent, it means that she spends just under one-third. If we said *roughly* or *about*, her rent could be slightly more or slightly less than one-third. If it takes me *nearly* ten minutes to walk to the station, it means it takes me not quite ten minutes. All of these adverbs could be used in writing too, but if you're writing a report it'd be usual to enter the actual figures or percentages in brackets, so:

Roughly half (53%) of the children in the study could not identify the US on a map of the world.

In conversation, we often use *about* when talking about time:

Shall we meet at about seven o'clock?

He says he'll be here in about five minutes.

And interestingly, we often talk about distances in terms of time:

I live about half an hour out of town.

It's about three hours on the train to London.

Well, Samad, thank you for your question, I think that's *about* all I have to say about these adverbs!

Samantha Hague has been a teacher of English language and communication skills for the past sixteen years. She taught in Japan for many years, but is now based at Newcastle University, where she teaches on an MA in Translating and Interpreting, as well as preparatory EFL programmes.