

Lots of / a lot of / a lot

A question from Manuel from Spain

I'm learning English by myself, and my question is: What is the difference between **a lot**, **a lot of** and **lots of**, and when do I have to use them?

Thank you!

Susan Fearn answers:

So, Manuel, a learner of English from Spain, wants to know the difference between **a lot of**, **lots of** and quite simply, **a lot**. The first point to make here is that English can be more or less formal and **lots of** is just a more conversational form of **a lot of**. So you could say or write:

There are a lot of people over there

Or you could *say*:

There are lots of people over there

The last one's chattier - it's less formal. And that's an easy way to remember it, I think.

Grammatically speaking, **a lot of** or **lots of** is used before a noun,

There are a lot of people

or what we call a 'noun phrase' – a group of words that serves as a noun. Now, can you spot the noun phrase in this sentence?

There are a lot of Spanish people living in London

And the noun phrase is, **Spanish people living in London: There are a lot of Spanish people living in London.**

A **lot**, or for that matter, **lots** without **of**, is used in answers. If the question is, ‘Are there many Spanish people living in London?’ the answer will be:

Yes, a lot

Or if you want to sound chattier, more conversational:

Yes, lots

Things do, however, get a bit more complicated in the question and the negative. If a noun is countable, in a negative or question, we normally use **many** instead of **a lot**.

Are there many British tourists in Spain?

There aren't many Spanish tourists in Outer Mongolia

But if a noun is uncountable – that's a mass noun like **food** or **money** or **love** - we use **much**.

I haven't got much money

Is there much food in the fridge?

To finish then, another quick test. Which of these three sentences is grammatically okay?

a) **I haven't got much money, but I've got much love**

b) **I've got much money but I haven't got much love**

c) **I haven't got much money but I've got a lot of love**

And the answer is c) **I haven't got much money but I've got a lot of love**. So if you got that, well done!

Susan Fearn has taught English in Europe, Japan and China and has made programmes for BBC Learning English in the past. She is currently teaching English for Journalism and Public Relations at the University of Westminster in London.