

# The differences between the adjectives little and small

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Learners of English often face difficulty in using synonyms or words that are close in meaning. Bolinger asserts that “the measure of synonymy is replaceability”. Two lexical items may have many characteristics in common; however, they are not synonyms unless one can be used instead of the other. Palmer confirms this rule and adds that as there are not true synonyms, which would be interchangeable in all their environments, this ‘test by substitution’ must be applied to the words which are interchangeable in certain contexts only. This can be exemplified by the adjectives *little* and *small* that can be both used with *house* but only *small* with *letters*. In addition, Palmer offers another possibility for investigation of synonymy. If two words are to be called synonyms, it is necessary that they have the same opposites, i.e. antonyms. This time again, they have to be taken from the same environment, for instance, it is precisely the context in which *small* with *little* are interchangeable that they have the antonym *big* or *large* (a *big house* or a *large house*), but the opposite of *small letters* is *capital letters*.

The Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary offers a number of definitions for the adjective *small*, the most important ones are:

“limited in size or amount when compared with what is typical or average”

“describes a very young child that older than a baby”,

“limited in the amount of an activity”

The adjective *little* is defined as “small in size” (a little house), “used between an adjective and a noun to emphasize that you like or dislike” (a nice little business), “short in time or distance” (a little sleep), “little children are young” (little boy/girl), “done in a way that is not very noticeable: a little smile, ‘not important’ in the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English.

The Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary defines *little* as an adjective as ‘small in size or amount’, “young”, “used to emphasize an opinion which is being given about something or someone”, “not very important or serious”.

Both dictionaries offer the word *little* is used as an adjective, a determiner or pronoun and an adverb, however the word *small* is used as an adjective and noun.

In order to establish what is the difference between *small* and *little*, we will study a number of examples and find out in which cases it is a priority, and maybe the only possible use of a word from this pair of synonyms in terms of grammar, stylistics and lexical meaning.

## I. Grammatical features

1. Adjective *little* is not used with the preceding adverbs *rather* / *quite* when it is necessary to give a comparative evaluation to an object or subject; in such cases an adjective *small* is used: *The town was rather small.*

2. It is necessary to avoid the clumsy degree of comparison *little*, using in such cases the *smaller* / *smallest*: *Their house is smaller than ours.*

## II. Stylistic features

In order to emphasize one’s contempt or sympathy and sometimes patronizing attitude toward the subject, the speaker uses an adjective *little*, thereby emphasizing his emotional attitude to such an object:

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*What a lovely little garden!*

### III. Lexical features

1. In the same sense adjectives *small* and *little* are used to indicate the age (*Mary had two little brothers.*), to indicate the degree of importance of an event, an object or phenomenon in meaning is not serious, insignificant, etc. (*You'll have to make a few small changes to the article.*);

#### 2. Differences in use *small* and *little*:

A. We use *small* when we talk about a quiet voice or sound (*She gave a small sigh.*); when we talk about the size of clothes (small, medium) (*Do you have these jeans in a small size?*); when we talk about modesty (*She likes to be a small person.*) when we talk about the scope of a business, activity (*small business.*); when it comes to humiliation (*She is happy to make me look small.*).

B. We use *little* when we talk about the size, the smaller of the presented (*May I take that little piece of pizza?*); when we mean a small number of members or residents (*I saw a little group of tourists.*); when it comes to the narrowness of thinking (*He has a petty little mind.*)

To sum up, the adjectives *little* and *small* share the same meaning in some cases and they can be thus called synonyms. However, the observations reported in this article indicate that we can differ *little* and *small* according to their grammatical, stylistic, lexical features. It is important to note that the difference exists also in the use of these words in stable phrases and expressions.

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