A guide to using quantifiers in English

Definition: Quantifiers are a type of determiner which denotes imprecise quantity. They differ from numbers or numerals which indicate precise quantity.

The most common examples: some / any, much, many, a lot, a few, several, enough.

1. Neutral quantifiers: Some and any: several, a number of, Etc

Some and any are both quantifiers and articles. In many contexts, some is the plural indefinite article, the plural of "a" or "an"; but more often, some implies a limited quantity, and for this reason has the value of a quantifier. Some is used in affirmative statements; it is replaced with any in negative and interrogative contexts.

Several and a number of imply "more than one, but less than a lot". They are not usually used in negative or interrogative structures, only in affirmative statements.

For example

There are several books / a number of books by J.K.Rowling in our library.

Several people / A number of people said that they'd seen the missing child.

Enough implies a sufficient quantity; it is used in affirmations, negations and questions.

For example:

We can get tickets for the concert; I've got enough money now.

Have you got enough money for the tickets?

2. Large quantity quantifiers:

much, many, lots of, plenty of, numerous, a large number of, etc.

► Much and many: much is used with non count nouns (always in the singular); many is used with count nouns in the plural

IMPORTANT NOTE: Much and many are not often used, in modern spoken English, inaffirmative statements; but they are very commonly used in interrogative and negative contexts.
Examples:
I have many reasons for thinking that this man is innocent is acceptable, but rather formal; most English speakers would more naturally say:
   I have plenty of / a lot of / a large number of reasons for thinking ....
Much whisky is of very good quality. This sentence is technically acceptable, but not probable in modern English. Most people would say (and write):
   A lot of whisky / A good proportion of whisky / Plenty of whisky ......

Remember this principle: don't use much or many in affirmative statements.

 ► Lots of, a lot of, plenty of, a large number of, numerous these expressions all mean more or less exactly the same. In the list above, they are arranged in order of formality, going from the most informal (lots of) to the most formal numerous. Informal language is more appropriate in dialogue, formal language in written documents.

3. Small quantity quantifiers:

 ► few, a few, little, a little, not many, not much, a small number of, etc.

These quantifiers are normally only used in affirmative statements, to which they give a negative colouring.

 ► Little, a little, not much are used with non count nouns (always in the singular)
   Few, a few, not many are used with count nouns in the plural.

Examples:
Few people can speak more than three languages
A few (of the) paintings in this gallery are really good.
There's little point in trying to mend it. You'll never succeed!
I've got a little money left; let's go and have a drink.

4 Recapitulation: table of usage for common English quantifiers

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5. Few or a few, little or a little?
The difference between the two expressions in each phrase is purely one of meaning, not of usage.
Without the article, few and little (used respectively with count nouns and non-count nouns) have the meaning of "not much/ not many, and possibly less than one might hope for or expect". These expressions have a negative value to them.

With the article, a few and a little have the meaning of "at least some, perhaps more than one might expect". These expressions have a positive value.

Examples:
Few of my friends were there, so I was disappointed.
A few of my friends were there, so I was quite happy.
Hurry up; there's little time left!
We have a little time to spare, so let's stop and have a cup of coffee.