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former refers to something that is first in the order of two or more things latter refers to something that is either second in a group of two things or last in a group of several some usage guides dictate that these words can only be used for groups of two but our definitions and the words actual usages reflect otherwise former is used to refer to the first thing in a group or list of two while latter refers to the second or last thing in the example above the former refers to big cities and the latter refers to small towns here s a little trick to help you remember what these words mean former first latter last the former and the latter are noun phrases that stand in for the first and last item in a previously mentioned list you always need to include the definite article the examples the former and the latter in sentences francis likes both swimming and hiking but he prefers the former of or in an earlier time before the present time or in the past his former wife a former employer the former president of the united states the luxury apartments are in a former factory former glory the painting was then restored to its former glory returned to its original good condition of or in an earlier time before the present time or in the past his former wife a former employer the former president of the united states the luxury apartments are in a former factory former glory the painting was then restored to its former glory returned to its original good condition the rules for using former versus latter in your writing are straightforward compared with other tricky words former directs us to the first of the two things and latter directs us to the second or last of them to avoid confusion don t use former or latter when writing about more than two things 1 independent in the former case they found none 2 the economist this happened in the former soviet union 3 the guardian in the former yugoslavia chechnya south asia 4 the guardian books filmed in the former yugoslav republic slovenia 5 the new york times you just happen to be in the former group 6 the new york times preceding in time prior or earlier the first contestants were eliminated during a former stage in the proceedings past long past or ancient in former times willow was consumed for pain preceding in order being the first of two our former manufacturing process was too costly synonyms antecedent foregoing see former in the oxford advanced learner s dictionary check pronunciation former definition of former adjective in oxford advanced american dictionary meaning pronunciation picture example sentences grammar usage notes synonyms and more january 1 2017 first things first former and latter are both terms that denote an item s place in a two part sequence former refers to the first of a set while latter refers to the second or last item they usually appear in the sentence immediately following the sequence they are describing former and latter in sequence former refers to something that came at an earlier time or before something else for example someone who believes in reincarnation might wonder about their former life or even lives before their present existence when something or someone has changed we can refer to them as former the former is tall the latter is short but can we apply them to plural nouns those who in the right side are young those who in the left side are old the former are tall the latter are short if we can use them in such case which one should we use former or formers word usage plural forms share improve this question former is used to describe someone who used to have a particular job position or role but no longer has it the unemployed executives include former sales managers directors and accountants former president richard nixon he pleaded not guilty to murdering his former wife synonyms previous one time erstwhile ex more synonyms of former a person or thing that forms or serves to form british terms education a pupil in a particular form or grade esp in a british secondary school fifth formers middle english fourmer see form erl 1300 50 collins concise english dictionary harpercollins publishers former 'fɔːmə adj prenominal former means being the first of two persons or things mentioned for example i was accepted to harvard and yale for college the former school had cheaper tuition adjective i was accepted to harvard and yale for college but the former had cheaper tuition noun when to use latter check pronunciation former definition of former adjective in oxford advanced learner s dictionary meaning pronunciation picture example sentences grammar usage notes synonyms and more 1 used to say what someone or something was in the past a former congressman her former husband two former friends 2 existing in the past they hope to restore the old theater to its former glory to make it as good as it was in the past she is now just a shadow of her former self she is not the same person she once was the former former 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