

Here's the reason why it's better to say best

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Everybody who speaks English as their native language knows exactly what the word “best” means.

If you're best at something, then there's nobody who's better than you. You are the top, the leader, the superior one.

So this must mean that if you can run 100 metres in 12 seconds, and your friend can only do it in 13 seconds, then you're the best.

Well, there are some people who say that's not right – that if there are only two of you, then you are not the “best” but the “better”, and that best should be reserved for referring to one of three or more people.

Why on earth would they think that? Well, it's because they've learnt one of those artificial rules about English grammar which were invented by people with nothing better to do – people who argued that it's “correct” to say the best, nicest, fastest if you are comparing three or more entities, but “wrong” if there are only two, in which case it “should” be better, nicer, faster...

This argument is completely without foundation.

There's absolutely no reason why we shouldn't say that something or someone



■ Usain Bolt, the fastest runner in the world over 100 metres, and therefore the best. Picture: PA

is the best or fastest of two. If you're the top, the leader, the superior one, then you are the best, regardless of how many are being evaluated. Adjectives like better and faster are comparatives, while best and fastest are superlatives.

If you compare yourself as a runner with everyone in your family, you might be able to say that you are faster and better than all the others – and that you're therefore the fastest and best.

Similarly, if you compare yourself just with your friend, then you are still the fastest and best – superlative – even if there are only two of you being compared.

Some readers might now be saying “but we were always taught...” Yes, exactly. We were taught this rule because there is no such rule.

The real rules of English grammar don't have to be taught to native speakers – by the time we are three and four years old, we know them already.

We all know it's normal to say things like “if you have to choose between the red one and the blue one, then the blue one would be the best choice”.

If you were to say “the better choice”, that would sound clumsy and artificial and pedantic – because it is.