

너무 vs 아주 vs 정말

too, so · very · really, truly

All three can mean “very”, but they start from different places. **너무** means “too (much)”, **아주** is a neutral “very”, and **정말** is “really” — the speaker vouching that it’s true.

At a glance

Word	Core meaning	Nuance	Typical pattern
너무	too; so (colloquial)	Excess that causes a problem. In everyday speech also a strong “so/very”, even for good things.	너무 비싸다 너무 많이 먹다
아주	very	Neutral, slightly textbook-like intensifier. Can’t stand alone.	아주 좋다 아주 잘하다
정말	really, truly	Emphasizes sincerity. Also a noun (“the truth”) and the reply 정말요? (Really?).	정말 맛있다 정말요?

How they differ

- 너무 = “too”.** When the degree is beyond what works, 너무 is the natural choice: **너무 비싸서 못 샀어요** (It was too expensive, so I didn’t buy it). **아주 비싸서** is possible but lacks the “too much” meaning. In casual speech 너무 is also used positively — **너무 예뻐요** (It’s so pretty) — and this is now accepted as standard.
- 아주 = plain “very”.** 아주 simply raises the degree with no extra feeling: **아주 잘했어요** (Very well done). It sounds a little formal or teacherly, and it can’t be used alone. Only 너무 carries the “not OK” feel of “too”: **너무 많이 먹지 마세요** ○ / **아주 많이 먹지 마세요** ×.
- Only 정말 can stand alone.** 정말 adds “I mean it”: **정말 고마워요** (Thank you so much). As a reply: **정말요?** ○ / **아주요?** × / **너무요?** ×. It also works as a noun: **정말이에요** (It’s true). The more casual equivalent is 진짜.

One step further

너무 often combines with -아서/어서 to give a reason: **너무 피곤해서 일찍 잤어요** (I was so tired I went to bed early). To react with fresh surprise, try 정말 with -네요: **정말 맛있네요!**

Practice

- A: 제가 복권에 당첨됐어요! B: ____요?
- 배탈 날 거예요. ____ 많이 먹지 마세요.
- 거짓말 아니예요. ____이에요!
- 그 영화는 ____ 길지 않아서 지루하지 않았어요.
- ____ 먼 옛날에 한 나무꾼이 살았어요.

Answers: 1 **정말** · 2 **너무** · 3 **정말** · 4 **너무** · 5 **아주**

Examples

- 이 커피는 너무 달아서 못 마시겠어요.**
This coffee is too sweet — I can’t drink it.
- 제 방은 작지만 아주 깨끗해요.**
My room is small but very clean.
- 이 김치찌개 정말 맛있어요!**
This kimchi stew is really delicious!
- A: 내일 시험이 없대요. B: 정말요?**
A: They say there’s no exam tomorrow. B: Really?
- 사람이 너무 많아서 다른 식당에 갔어요.**
There were too many people, so we went to another restaurant.
- 할머니는 아주 건강하세요.**
My grandmother is in very good health.

Which one fits?

Sentence	너무	아주	정말
이 옷은 저한테 ____ 작아서 못 입어요.	◎	○	○
A: 저 다음 달에 결혼해요. B: ____요? 축하해요!	×	×	◎
(선생님이 학생에게) 발음이 ____ 좋아요. 잘했어요.	○	◎	◎
어제 술을 ____ 많이 마셔서 머리가 아파요.	◎	○	○
선물 ____ 고마워요.	◎	△	◎

◎ natural ○ possible △ awkward × wrong

Watch out

- × **A: 저 합격했어요! B: 아주요? 축하해요!**
○ **A: 저 합격했어요! B: 정말요? 축하해요!**
Only 정말 can stand alone as “Really?”; 아주 and 너무 need something to modify.
- × **그 사람은 제 정말 친구예요.**
○ **그 사람은 제 진짜 친구예요.**
정말 is an adverb or a stand-alone noun, so it can’t mean “real” before a noun; use 진짜 (or 진정한).
- × **이 가방은 아주 안 비싸요.**
○ **이 가방은 너무 비싸지 않아요.**
English “not very/not too expensive” is 너무 비싸지 않다; 아주 안 비싸다 doesn’t express “not very”.