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hard·ly  (härd lē)

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adv.

1. To almost no degree; barely at all; almost not: *I could hardly hear the speaker.*
2. Probably or surely not: *He is hardly the kind of guy you would want to date. It's hardly a secret that they are engaged.*
3. With great difficulty or effort: *I could hardly get up the stairs.*
4. With severity; harshly: *"The winter months would deal hardly with many of these poor folk" (William Black).*

[Middle English *hardli*, from Old English *heardlice*, harshly, bravely, from *heard*, hard; see [HARD](#).]

Usage Note: In Standard English, *hardly*, *scarcely*, and similar adverbs cannot be used with a negative. The sentence *I couldn't hardly see him*, for instance, is not acceptable. This violation of the double negative rule is curious because these adverbs are not truly negative in meaning. Rather, they minimize the state or event they describe. Thus *hardly* means "almost not at all," *rarely* means "practically never," and so forth. The sentence *Mary hardly laughed* means that Mary did laugh a little, not that she kept from laughing altogether, and therefore does not express a negative proposition. But adverbs like *hardly* and *scarcely* do share some important features of negative adverbs, even though they may not have purely negative meaning. For one thing, they combine with *any* and *at all*, which are characteristically associated with negative contexts. Thus we say *I hardly saw him at all* or *I never saw him at all* but not *I occasionally saw him at all*. Similarly, we say *I hardly had any time* or *I didn't have any time* but not *I had any time* and so on. Like other negative adverbs, *hardly* triggers inversion of the subject and auxiliary verb when it begins a sentence. Thus we say *Hardly had I arrived when she left* on the pattern of *Never have I read such a book*. · *Hardly* and other minimizing adverbs are properly followed by *when* and not *than* in sentences like *I had hardly walked inside [when/than] it began to rain*. In our 2008 survey, 79 percent of the Usage Panel rejected the use of *than* in the previous sentence. See Usage Notes at [double negative](#), [rarely](#), [scarcely](#).

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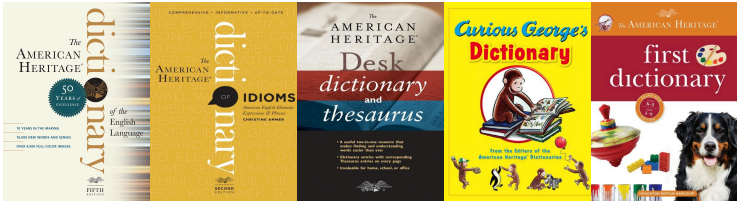
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