

Adjectives & Adverbs

Explanation

Adjectives and adverbs are words you can use to modify—to describe or add meaning to—other words.

Connections

See also “Commas” and “Dangling Modifiers.”

Adjectives modify nouns or pronouns. Examples of some common adjectives are: young, small, loud, short, fat, pretty. You can also identify many adjectives by the following common endings.

-able: honorable, useable
-al: parental, economical
-ful: forgetful, soulful

-ic: frantic, scientific
-ive: festive, disruptive
-ish: selfish, boyish

-less: ruthless, careless
-ous: joyous, rebellious

Adverbs, on the other hand, modify verbs, adjectives, other adverbs, and even whole clauses. Adverbs can tell us *how* something is done, *when* it is done, and *where* it is done. Examples of some common adverbs are: really, quickly, especially, early, well, immediately, yesterday.

While many adverbs do end with “-ly”, don’t take this for granted: some adverbs, like “almost” and “very” do not end this way, and some words that do end in “-ly”, like “lively,” are actually adjectives.

Comparatives and Superlatives

Many adverbs and most adjectives generally have three forms: the normal form; the comparative form, which you can use to compare two things; and the superlative form, which you can use to compare three or more things. The following chart gives you some guidelines for forming the comparative and superlative forms of adjectives and adverbs.

Rules	Examples		
	Normal	Comparative	Superlative
Short adjectives & adverbs: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Add -er for comparative • Add -est for superlative 	Green Big Hungry	Greener Bigger Hungrier	Greenest Biggest Hungriest
	Soon Late	Sooner Later	Soonest Latest

Rules	Examples		
	Normal	Comparative	Superlative
Longer adjectives & most longer adverbs ending in -ly: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Add “more” + adjective/adverb for comparative • Add “most” + adjective/adverb for superlative 	Delicious Incredible More delicious	More incredible More	Most delicious Most incredible
	Slowly Easily Brightly	More slowly More easily More brightly	Most slowly Most easily Most brightly
Irregular adjectives and adverbs have special forms	Good Bad Little (amount) Many	Better Worse Less More	Best Worst Least Most
	Well Badly	Better Worse	Best Worst

When using comparative and superlative forms, keep the following in mind:

- Many adverbs indicating time, place, and degree (i.e. tomorrow, here, totally) do not have comparative or superlative forms.
- Adjectives and adverbs that indicate an absolute or unchangeable quality should not be used with comparative and superlative constructions. Such absolute modifiers include words like final, main, impossible, perfect, unavoidable, unique.

Placement of Adjectives & Adverbs

Misplaced adjective or adverbs can cause confusion, as in the following example:

- Shaken not stirred, James Bond drank his martinis.

The writer probably is probably referring to the martinis, but the way this sentence is written, it implies that James Bond himself is shaken and not stirred.

For more information about misplaced adjectives and adverbs, see the “Dangling Modifiers” handout.

Adjectives

In order to avoid confusion, try to place adjectives as close as possible to the nouns or pronouns they modify. Most one-word adjectives come right before the nouns they modify. In the examples below, the adjectives are double-underlined and the nouns they modify are in italics.

- He made a delicious *dinner*.
- The hungry *girls* devoured it quickly.
- Their full *stomachs* pushed against their jeans.
- But they couldn't resist the incredible *dessert*.

One major exception to this rule is when an adjective follows a linking verb (i.e. is/are, was/were, feel, smell, taste, look, believe). For example:

- *Dinner* was delicious.
- The *girls* were hungry.
- Their *stomachs* felt full.
- *Dessert* looked incredible.

Be careful. Sometimes writers will use adverbs with a linking verb when what they really want is an adjective, or vice-versa. Choosing the adjective versus the adverb form of the same word has big implications for the meaning of a sentence. For example:

Adjective	Adverb
I feel bad. (I feel ill, depressed, apologetic)	I feel badly (I'm bad at feeling)

Multiple-word adjective phrases generally follow the noun or pronoun they modify, but occasionally can come before.

- The *girl* snoring in the next room woke up her roommate.
- The *customer* annoyed with the slow service complained to the manager.
- Proud her youngest son, his *mother* showed his picture to strangers on the bus.

Adjective clauses—easy to identify because they start with the words “who,” “whom,” “whose,” “which,” “that,” “when,” and “where”—follow the noun they modify. For example:

- She had a *goat* that she loved very much.
- His favorite *girlfriend*, who he thought was coming over later that evening, had just received an anonymous phone call.

Adverbs

As with adjectives, adverbs need to be placed where the reader can clearly understand the meaning you intend. Adverbs are a bit more flexible, however: both single-word and multiple-word adverb phrases can generally be placed either before or after the words they modify. In the examples below, the adverbs and adverb phrases are underlined and the words they modify are in italics. For example:

- The lion *jumped* skillfully through the flaming hoop.
- The lion skillfully *jumped* through the flaming hoop.
- Before next Wednesday, *she* needed to cash her paycheck.
- *She* needed to cash her paycheck before next Wednesday.

Punctuating Adjectives and Adverbs

Adjectives

To help you decide whether or not you should use a comma when separating two or more adjectives, ask yourself the following two questions:

- Can the order of the two adjectives be reversed?
- Can the word "and" be put between the adjectives?

If either answer is yes, then the adjectives are coordinate, and you should use a comma. For example:

- Jessica is an ambitious, intelligent woman.
- Jessica is an intelligent, ambitious woman. [order reversed]
- Jessica is an intelligent and ambitious woman. [added "and"]

If you cannot reverse the order of the adjectives or add "and" to the adjectives, then they are cumulative, and do not require a comma. For example:

- Roger has fourteen silver horns.
- Roger has silver fourteen horns. [The reversed order does not work.]
- Roger has fourteen and silver horns. [The added "and" does not work.]

Adverbs

Place a comma at the end of an adverb phrase when it comes at the beginning of the sentence. For example:

- After some thought, she decided to buy her cousin's used car.

For more detailed information on when to use commas with adjectives and adverbs, please see the "Commas" handout.

Exercises

A) Identify the adjectives and adverbs in the following sentences by underlining the adjectives twice and the adverbs once. .

For example: The one-eyed green aliens stepped cautiously out of their spaceship.

1. Their timid leader tentatively put one fat, calloused foot on the grass.
2. She then gingerly placed the other foot down.
3. She paused, thoughtfully scratched her forehead, and then started to waddle quite gracelessly toward a dim light.
4. Soon the braver aliens followed her but the more cowardly aliens hung back inside the door of the silver spaceship.
5. Suddenly, they heard a short, high-pitched yelp.
6. The youngest alien had stepped accidentally on the tail of a small furry creature, and both of them cried out instinctively.
7. The little alien regained his composure right away and, curious about the strange creature, he carefully reached down to pick up the frightened mouse.
8. The mouse, still terrified, dashed away.
9. It ran over the sensitive toes of several aliens who squealed loudly
10. The resulting commotion distracted the group, and they didn't notice the two young children slowly riding up on their creaky three-speed bicycles.

B) Create more detailed sentences by adding your own adjectives and adverbs to modify the words in italics. For example:

- The *star* *punched* the *photographer*.

The reclusive movie star violently punched the pushy photographer.

1. The *island* was populated by *birds* that *soared* over the trees.
2. It was also populated by *tourists* who stayed at the *resort* and *sat* by the *pool*.
3. The *man* in a *suit* was *reading* a *magazine* on his morning commute to work.
4. The *woman* next to him *sighed* as the train *stopped* in a tunnel.
5. The neighbors *gossiped* about the *people* who lived in the *house* on the corner.
6. UPS delivered *packages* to the back door and *strangers* in *cars* visited.
7. The students in the computer lab *talked* to each other and *worked* on their essays.
8. The *tutor* *helped* the *boy* with his *homework*.
9. The *children* *ate* the *ice cream*.
10. A *bully* *grabbed* one of the cones and *stuffed* it in his *mouth*.