5.8: Adjectives and Adverbs

Skills to Develop

- Identify functions of adjectives and adverbs
- Identify differences between adjectives and adverbs
- Identify common mistakes with adjectives and adverbs

Adjectives and adverbs describe things. For example, compare the phrase “the bear” to “the red bear” or the phrase “run” to “run slowly.”

In both of these cases, the adjective (red) or adverb (slowly) changes how we understand the phrase. When you first read the word bear, you probably didn’t imagine a red bear. When you saw the word run you probably didn’t think of it as something done slowly.

Adjectives and adverbs modify other words; they change our understanding of things.

For a catchy introduction to these words in song, watch the following videos.
Functions of Adjectives

An adjective modifies a noun; that is, it provides more detail about a noun. This can be anything from color to size to temperature to personality. Adjectives usually occur just before the nouns they modify. In the following examples, adjectives are in bold, while the nouns they modify are in italics (the big bear):

- The generator is used to convert mechanical energy into electrical energy.
• The **steel pipes** contain a **protective sacrificial anode** and are surrounded by **packing material**.

Adjectives can also follow a linking verb. In these instances, adjectives can modify pronouns as well. In the following examples, adjectives are still bold, while the linking verb is in italics this time (the sun *is yellow*):

• The schoolhouse *was red*.
• I *looked good* today.
• She *was funny*.

Numbers can also be adjectives in some cases. When you say “Seven is my lucky number,” *seven* is a noun, but when you say “There are seven cats in this painting,” *seven* is an adjective because it is modifying the noun *cats*.

Exercise (PageIndex(1))

Identify the adjectives in the following sentences:

1. Of the four seasons, fall is my favorite; I love the red leaves, the cool weather, and the brisk wind.
2. My roommate, on the other hand, thinks that summer is the best season.
3. I think she is crazy.
4. Fall is better than summer. Summer is too hot and muggy to be enjoyable.

**Answer**

The adjectives have been bolded in the sentences below:

1. Of the **four** seasons, fall is my **favorite**; I love the **red** leaves, the **cool** weather, and the **brisk** wind.
2. My roommate, on the other hand, thinks that summer is the **best** season.
3. I think she is **crazy**.
4. Fall is **better** than summer. Summer is too **hot** and **muggy** to be **enjoyable**. (All of these adjectives follow linking verbs.)

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**Comparable Adjectives**

![Comparable Adjectives](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Composition/Book%3A_Basic_Reading_and_Writing_(Lumen)/Module_5%3A_Grammar/Comparable-Adjectives)

*Figure (PageIndex(2))*
Some adjectives are **comparable**. For example, a person may be polite, but another person may be more polite, and a third person may be the most polite of the three. The word *more* here modifies the adjective *polite* to indicate a comparison is being made (a *comparative*), and *most* modifies the adjective to indicate an absolute comparison (a *superlative*).

There is another way to compare adjectives in English. Many adjectives can take the suffixes –*er* and –*est* (sometimes requiring additional letters before the suffix; see forms for *far* below) to indicate the comparative and superlative forms, respectively:

- *great*, *greater*, *greatest*
- *deep*, *deeper*, *deepest*
- *far*, *farther*, *farthest*

Some adjectives are *irregular* in this sense:

- *good*, *better*, *best*
- *bad*, *worse*, *worst*
- *little*, *less*, *least*

Another way to convey comparison is by incorporating the words *more* and *most*. There is no simple rule to decide which means is correct for any given adjective, however. The general tendency is for shorter adjectives to take the suffixes, while longer adjectives do not—but sometimes *sound* of the word is the deciding factor.

- *more beautiful* not *beautifuller*
- *more pretentious* not *pretentiouser*

While there is no perfect rule to determine which adjectives will or won’t take –*er* and –*est* suffixes, this video lays out some “sound rules” that can serve as helpful guidelines:
The adjective *fun* is one of the most notable exceptions to the rules. If you follow the sound rules we just learned about, the comparative should be *funner* and the superlative *funnest*. However, for a long time, these words were considered non-standard, with *more fun* and *most fun* acting as the correct forms.

The reasoning behind this rule is now obsolete (it has a lot to do with the way *fun* became an adjective), but the stigma against *funner* and *funnest* remains. While the tides are beginning to change, it's safest to stick to *more fun* and *most fun* in formal situations (such as in academic writing or in professional correspondence).

**Exercise**

What are the correct comparative and superlative forms for the adjectives below?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adjective</th>
<th>Comparative</th>
<th>Superlative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>fun</td>
<td><em>more fun</em> (or <em>funner</em>, conversationally)</td>
<td><em>most fun</em> (or <em>funnest</em>, conversationally)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>red</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shimmery</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fresh</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjective</td>
<td>Comparative</td>
<td>Superlative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>popular</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>squishy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>quiet</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>large</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Answer**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adjective</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>fun</td>
<td>more fun</td>
<td>most fun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>red</td>
<td>redder</td>
<td>reddest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shimmery</td>
<td>more shimmery</td>
<td>most shimmery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fresh</td>
<td>fresher</td>
<td>freshest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>popular</td>
<td>more popular</td>
<td>most popular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>squishy</td>
<td>squishier</td>
<td>squishiest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>quiet</td>
<td>quieter</td>
<td>quietest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>large</td>
<td>larger</td>
<td>largest</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Non-Comparable Adjectives**

Many adjectives do not naturally lend themselves to comparison. For example, some English speakers would argue that it does not make sense to say that one thing is “more ultimate” than another, or that something is “most ultimate,” since the word *ultimate* is already an absolute. Such adjectives are called **non-comparable adjectives**. Other examples include *dead, true, and unique*. 

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Note

Native speakers will frequently play with non-comparable adjectives. Although pregnant is logically non-comparable (someone is pregnant or she is not), you may hear a sentence like “She looks more and more pregnant each day.” Likewise extinct and equal appear to be non-comparable, but one might say that a language about which nothing is known is “more extinct” than a well-documented language with surviving literature but no speakers, and George Orwell once wrote “All animals are equal, but some are more equal than others.”

Functions of Adverbs

Adverbs can perform a wide range of functions: they can modify verbs, adjectives, and even other adverbs. They can come either before or after the word they modify. In the following examples, adverbs are in bold, while the words they modify are in italics (the quite handsome man):

- The desk is made of an especially corrosion-resistant industrial steel.
- The power company uses huge generators which are generally turned by steam turbines.
- Jaime won the race, because he ran quickly.
- This fence was installed sloppily. It needs to be redone.

An adverb may provide information about the manner, place, time, frequency, certainty, or other circumstances of the activity indicated by the verb. Some examples, where again the adverb is in bold and the words modified are in italics:

- Suzanne sang loudly (loudly modifies the verb sang, indicating the manner of singing)
- We left it here (here modifies the verb phrase left it, indicating place)
- I worked yesterday (yesterday modifies the verb worked, indicating time)
- He undoubtedly did it (undoubtedly modifies the verb phrase did it, indicating certainty)
- You often make mistakes (often modifies the verb phrase make mistakes, indicating frequency)

They can also modify noun phrases, prepositional phrases, or whole clauses or sentences, as in the following examples. Once again the adverbs are in bold, while the words they modify are in italics.

- I bought only the fruit (only modifies the noun phrase the fruit)
• Roberto drove us **almost** to the station (*almost* modifies the prepositional phrase *to the station*)
• **Certainly** we need to act (*certainly* modifies the sentence as a whole)

Exercise \(\PageIndex{3}\)

Identify the adverbs in these paragraphs:

Mass extinctions are **insanely** catastrophic—but important—events that punctuate the history of life on Earth. The Jurassic/Cretaceous boundary was originally thought of to represent a mass extinction, but has subsequently been "downgraded" to a minor extinction event based on new discoveries.

However, compared to other important stratigraphic boundaries, like the end-Triassic or the end-Cretaceous, the Jurassic/Cretaceous boundary remains really poorly understood.

**Answer**

There are five adverbs in the paragraphs:

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insanely; originally; subsequently; really; poorly
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Here the adverbs have been bolded:

Mass extinctions are **insanely** catastrophic—but important—events that punctuate the history of life on Earth. The Jurassic/Cretaceous boundary was **originally** thought of to represent a mass extinction, but has **subsequently** been "downgraded" to a minor extinction event based on new discoveries.

However, compared to other important stratigraphic boundaries, like the end-Triassic or the end-Cretaceous, the Jurassic/Cretaceous boundary remains **really poorly** understood.

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**Intensifiers and Adverbs of Degree**

Adverbs can also be used as modifiers of adjectives, and of other adverbs, often to indicate degree. Here are a few examples:

• **You are** quite right (the adverb *quite* modifies the adjective *right*)
• Milagros is **exceptionally** pretty (the adverb *exceptionally* modifies the adjective *pretty*)
• She sang **very** loudly (the adverb *very* modifies another adverb—*loudly*)
• Wow! You ran **really** quickly! (the adverb *really* modifies another adverb—*quickly*)

Other intensifiers include *mildly, pretty, slightly*, etc.

This video provides more discussion and examples of intensifiers:
Note

Adverbs may also undergo comparison, taking comparative and superlative forms. This is usually done by adding *more* and *most* before the adverb (*more slowly, most slowly*). However, there are a few adverbs that take non-standard forms, such as *well*, for which *better* and *best* are used.

Differences Between Adjectives and Adverbs

As we’ve learned, adjectives and adverbs act in similar but different roles. A lot of the time this difference can be seen in the structure of the words:

- A **clever** new idea.
- A **cleverly** developed idea.

*Clever* is an adjective, and *cleverly* is an adverb. This adjective + *ly* construction is a short-cut to identifying adverbs.
While -\textit{ly} is helpful, it’s not a universal rule. Not all words that end in -\textit{ly} are adverbs: \textit{lovely}, \textit{costly}, \textit{friendly}, etc. Additionally, not all adverbs end in -\textit{ly}: \textit{here}, \textit{there}, \textit{together}, \textit{yesterday}, \textit{aboard}, \textit{very}, \textit{almost}, etc.

\textbf{Note}

Some words can function both as an adjective and as an adverb:

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textit{Fast} is an adjective in “a \textbf{fast} car” (where it qualifies the noun \textit{car}), but an adverb in “he drove \textit{fast}” (where it modifies the verb \textit{drove}).
  \item \textit{Likely} is an adjective in “a likely outcome” (where it modifies the noun \textit{outcome}), but an adverb in “we will \textit{likely} go” (where it modifies the verb \textit{go}).
\end{itemize}

\section*{Common Mistakes with Adjectives and Adverbs}

\subsection*{Mistaking Adverbs and Adjectives}

One common mistake with adjectives and adverbs is using one in the place of the other. For example:

\begin{itemize}
  \item I wish I could write as neat as he can.
    \begin{itemize}
      \item The word should be \textit{neatly}, an adverb, since it’s modifying a verb.
    \end{itemize}
  \item Well, that’s real nice of you.
\end{itemize}
• Should be *really*, an adverb, since it's modifying an adjective

Remember, if you’re modifying a noun or pronoun, you should use an adjective. If you’re modifying anything else, you should use an adverb.

**Good v. Well**

One of the most commonly confused adjective/adverb pairs is *good* versus *well*. There isn’t really a good way to remember this besides memorization. *Good* is an adjective. *Well* is an adverb. Let’s look at a couple of sentence where people often confuse these two:

She plays basketball *good*.

In this sentence *good* is supposed to be modifying *plays*, a verb; therefore the use of *good*—an adjective—is incorrect. *Plays* should be modified by an adverb. The correct sentence would read “She plays basketball *well*.”

I’m doing *good*.

In this sentence, *good* is supposed to be modifying *doing*, a verb. Once again, this means that *well*—an adverb—should be used instead: “I’m doing *well*.”

**Note**

The sentence “I’m doing good” can be grammatically correct, but only when it means “I’m doing good things,” rather than when it is describing how a person is feeling.

**Exercise** *(PageIndex{4})*

Select the correct modifier for each sentence:

1. Billy has to work (real / really) hard to be (healthy / healthily).
2. Kate is really (good / well) with bows. She shoots really (good / well).
3. Eli reads (quick / quickly), and he retains the information (good / well).

**Answer**

1. Billy has to work **really** hard to be **healthy**.
   • Remember that *to be* is a linking verb. Linking verbs often connect the subject of the sentence (Billy) to an adjective that describes it (*healthy*).
2. Kate is really **good** with bows. She shoots really **well**.
3. Eli reads **quickly**, and he retains the information **well**.
Adjectives

If you’re a native English speaker, you may have noticed that “the big red house” sounds more natural than “the red big house.” The video below explains the order in which adjectives occur in English:

Exercise \(\PageIndex{5}\)

Select the adjectives that are in a natural sounding word order for each sentence.

1. She found a(n) _______ record in her attic
   1. dusty, Jazz, old
   2. old, dusty, Jazz
   3. Jazz, dusty, old
2. He walked into a pole because he was distracted by a(n) _____ dog.
   1. adorable, tiny, brown
   2. tiny, adorable, brown
   3. tiny, brown, adorable
3. The crowd was astounded when the professional chess player arrived wearing a(n) ____ suit to his match.
   1. antique, blue, cashmere
   2. cashmere, blue, antique
   3. blue, antique, cashmere
4. For her daughter’s birthday, she made a(n) _____ doll house.
   1. cute, wooden, yellow
   2. wooden, yellow, cute
   3. cute, yellow, wooden

Answer
   1. b. old, dusty, Jazz
   2. a. adorably, tiny, brown
   3. a. antique, blue, cashmere
   4. c. cute, yellow, wooden

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Adverbs

**Only**

Have you ever noticed the effect the word *only* can have on a sentence, especially depending on where it’s placed? Let’s look at a simple sentence:

She loves horses.

Let’s see how *only* can influence the meaning of this sentence:

- *Only* she loves horses.
  - No one loves horses but her.
- She *only* loves horses.
  - The one thing she does is love horses.
- She loves *only* horses.
  - She loves horses and nothing else.

*Only* modifies the word that directly follows it. Whenever you use the word *only* make sure you’ve placed it correctly in your sentence.

**Literally**

A linguistic phenomenon is sweeping the nation: people are using *literally* as an intensifier. How many times have you heard things like “It was literally the worst thing that has ever happened to me,” or “His head literally exploded when I told him I was going to be late again”? Some people love this phrase, while it makes other people want to pull their hair out.

So what’s the problem with this? According to *Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary*, the actual definition of *literal* is as follows:

- involving the ordinary or usual meaning of a word
• giving the meaning of each individual word
• completely true and accurate: not exaggerated

According to this definition, *literally* should be used only when something actually happened. Our cultural usage may be slowly shifting to allow *literally* as an intensifier, but it’s best to avoid using *literally* in any way other than its dictionary definition, especially in formal writing.

Exercise \(\PageIndex{6}\)

Which of the following sentences use the adverb *literally* correctly?

1. David often takes things too literally.
2. Tommy literally died when he heard the news.
3. Teddy is literally the best person on the planet.

Answer

1. This sentence is correct.
2. This sentence is incorrect (hopefully). Try replacing *literally* with *practically* or *nearly*.
3. This sentence may or may not be true; it’s something that would be very hard to verify. When you’re being purposefully hyperbolic, this may be okay in a non-formal setting, but you may want to consider replacing *literally* with an intensifier like *actually* or omitting the adverb altogether, since *literally* has such a stigma around it.

Self-Check

Media, iframe, embed and object tags are not supported inside of a PDF.

References