Grammatic and Mechanics
Using Adjectives and Adverbs

Adjectives and adverbs are words that modify or qualify the meanings of other words. Adjectives describe, identify, or quantify nouns or pronouns; adverbs modify verbs, adjectives, other adverbs, or clauses. Adjectives tell us “which one,” “what kind of,” or “how many” and usually come before the word they modify:

- the red barn (answers the question “which” barn)
- an excellent performance (answers the question “what kind of” performance)
- for three months (answers the question “how many” months)

Although most adjectives precede the noun or other word(s) they modify, they can also follow linking verbs (be, seem, appear, become) and function as a subject or object complement, for example, “The performance was excellent.” In this sentence, the adjective “excellent” functions as a subject complement that modifies the noun “performance.”

Adverbs, on the other hand, tell us “where,” “when,” “how,” “why,” “to what extent,” or “under what conditions.” Many adverbs are formed by adding “-ly” to an adjective (swift/swiftly; cautious/cautiously; efficient/efficiently). However, for most adjectives ending in “-ic,” add “-ally” (artistic/artistically).

- She responded swiftly to the emergency. (“swiftly” modifies the verb “responded”)
- He worked cautiously and efficiently. (both “cautiously” and “efficiently” modify the verb “worked”)
- The performance was artistically beautiful. (“artistically” modifies the adjective “beautiful”)
- She very soon realized her mistake. (“very” modifies the adverb “soon”)
- Abruptly, the woman left the party. (“Abruptly” modifies the independent clause that makes up the rest of the sentence)

Be mindful that some adjectives also end in “-ly” (lovely, friendly, womanly) and have no distinctive adverb form.

- The setting for the wedding was lovely.
- The woman in the next apartment is a friendly person.
- She has a womanly appearance.

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USING ADJECTIVES

Most adjectives have three forms: positive (smart), comparative (smarter), and superlative (smartest). The comparative form is used to compare two things; the superlative form is used to compare three or more things. As illustrated above, many short regular adjectives form the comparative by adding “-er” to the positive form and the superlative by adding “-est” (tall, taller, tallest); however, if the adjective ends in “-y,” the pattern is adjusted (pretty, prettier, prettiest).

Other adjectives of two or more syllables form the comparative by using “more” (more intelligent) or “less” (less dangerous) and the superlative by using “most” (most intelligent) or “least” (least dangerous). Some adjectives can also have irregular forms (good, better, best; bad, worse, worst).

Adjectives are used primarily for purposes of evaluation (an interesting novel, an expensive dinner, an important decision, a beautiful view) and have different functions in relation to how they are used.

- Descriptive adjectives allow you to make comparisons in relation to age (a young assistant, an old acquaintance); color (a golden notebook, a white carnation); size (a large apartment, a huge commitment); shape (a long hallway, a round table); material (a wooden handle, a diamond necklace), or condition (a faded envelope, a tarnished memory).

- Proper adjectives are formed from proper nouns and as such are capitalized: America (proper noun), American (proper adjective), a European vacation, a Navajo rug, a Shakespearean play, a Protestant church, a Catholic mass, a Buddhist temple.

- Possessive adjectives (my, your, our, their, his, her, its) are used to point out or indicate a particular noun (my brother, your sister).

- Demonstrative adjectives (they, that, these, those) also refer to a particular noun (that student, those boxes).

- Numerical or quantity adjectives (five pounds, first choice, many times) are used to indicate a particular amount.

- Interrogative adjectives (where, what, which, whose) ask questions about the words they modify (what number, which floor).

- Compound adjectives consist of two or more words used as a unit to describe a noun (a sixty-five-year-old man, an old-fashioned attitude).

- Coordinate adjectives usually make subjective or evaluative judgments or assessments and are presented in a sequence. They relate equally to the noun they modify and are separated by commas (the long, winding, and treacherous road; the complex, highly sophisticated, and intricate system).

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In addition to the above, note that articles (a, an, the) are also classified as adjectives or determiners that identify or quantify.

There is a student here to see you. (the indefinite article “a” modifies the noun “student” and implies there is only one student)

The class discussion ended with an argument between two of the students. (the indefinite article “an” modifies the noun “argument”)

The auction was extremely enjoyable and successful. (the definite article “The” modifies the noun “auction.”)

**USING ADVERBS**

Use an adverb, not an adjective, to modify a verb, for example, “I drive carefully.” In this sentence, the adverb “carefully” is used to modify the verb “drive.” Using the adjective “careful” would be incorrect. Adverbs can also modify adjectives or other adverbs, for example, “The painting was extremely provocative.” In this sentence, the adverb “extremely” is used to modify the adjective “provocative.” In another example (“The building was really magnificently designed.”), the adverb “really” is used to modify the adverb “magnificently.”

Most adverbs have the same three forms as adjectives: positive (efficiently), comparative (more efficiently), and superlative (most efficiently); “more” is used to form the comparative and “most” is used to form the superlative. Some adverbs add “-er” and “-est” (hard, harder, hardest; fast, faster, fastest); others have irregular forms (little, less, least; badly, worse, worst). As noted above, many adverbs are formed by adding “-ly” to an adjective, but remember that not all words ending in “-ly” are adverbs.

**TROUBLESPOTS**

- **good and well:** The word “good” is an adjective and modifies a noun or pronoun (a good experience, a good person). The word “well” is used as an adverb when it modifies a verb, for example, “The woman did not feel well.” In this sentence, “well” modifies the verb “did feel”; to say that the woman “did not feel good” would be incorrect. However, “well” can also function as an adjective when referring to health, for example, “The woman feels well.” In this case, “well” is being used as an adjective that describes the “woman.”

- **bad and badly:** The word “bad” is an adjective used to describe a noun or pronoun (a bad experience, a bad person), for example, “She felt bad that we had to leave the party.” In this sentence, the adjective “bad” is used after the linking verb to describe the pronoun “She,” which is also the subject of the sentence. In another example (“He behaved badly at the party.”), the adverb “badly” is used to modify the verb “behaved.”