**What Is an Adjective?**

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**Adjectives** are words that describe the qualities or states of being of nouns: *enormous, doglike, silly, yellow, fun, fast*. They can also describe the quantity of nouns: *many, few, millions, eleven*.

**Adjectives modify nouns**

Most students learn that adjectives are words that modify (describe) nouns. **Adjectives do not modify verbs or adverbs or other adjectives.**

Margot wore a **beautiful** hat to the singing contest.

**Furry** dogs may overheat in the summertime.

My cake should have **sixteen** candles.

The **scariest** villain of all time is Darth Vader.

In the sentences above, the adjectives are easy to spot because they come immediately before the nouns they modify.

But adjectives can do more than just modify nouns. They can also act as a complement to linking verbs or the verb *to be*. A linking verb is a verb like *to feel, to seem,* or *to taste* that describes a state of being or a sensory experience.

That cow sure is **happy**.

It smells **gross** in the locker room.

Driving is **faster** than walking.

The technical term for an adjective used this way is *predicate adjective*.

**Uses of adjectives**

Adjectives tell the reader how much—or how many—of something you’re talking about, which thing you want passed to you, or which kind of something you want.

Please use **three white flowers** in the arrangement.

*Three* and *white* are modifying flowers.

Often, when adjectives are used together, you should separate them with a comma or conjunction. See “Coordinate Adjectives” below for more detail.

I’m looking for a **small, good-tempered dog** to keep as a pet.

My new dog is **small and good-tempered**.

**Degrees of comparison**

Adjectives come in three forms: *absolute, comparative,* and *superlative*. Absolute adjectives describe something in its own right.

A **cool** guy

A **messy** desk

A **mischievous** cat

**Garrulous** squirrels

Comparative adjectives, unsurprisingly, make a comparison between two or more things. For most one-syllable adjectives, the comparative is formed by adding the suffix *-er* (or just *-r* if the adjective already ends with an *e*). For two-syllable adjectives ending in -y, replace -y with -ier. For multi-syllable adjectives, add the word *more*.

A **cooler** guy

A **messier** desk

A **more mischievous** cat

**More garrulous** squirrels

Superlative adjectives indicate that something has the highest degree of the quality in question. One-syllable adjectives become superlatives by adding the suffix *-est* (or just *-st* for adjectives that already end in *e*). Two-syllable adjectives ending in *-y* replace *-y* with *-iest*. Multi-syllable adjectives add the word *most*. When you use an article with a superlative adjective, it will almost always be the definite article (*the*) rather than *a* or *an*. Using a superlative inherently indicates that you are talking about a specific item or items.

The **coolest** guy

The **messiest** desk

The **most mischievous** cat

The **most garrulous** squirrels

**Coordinate adjectives**

Coordinate adjectives should be separated by a comma or the word *and*. Adjectives are said to be coordinate if they modify the same noun in a sentence.

This is going to be a **long, cold** winter.

Isobel’s **dedicated** and **tireless** efforts made all the difference.

But just the fact that two adjectives appear next to each other doesn’t automatically mean they are coordinate. Sometimes, an adjective and a noun form a single semantic unit, which is then modified by another adjective. In this case, the adjectives are not coordinate and should not be separated by a comma.

My cat, Goober, loves sleeping on this **tattered woolen** sweater.

No one could open the **old silver** locket.

In some cases, it’s pretty hard to decide whether two adjectives are coordinate or not. But there are a couple of ways you can test them. Try inserting the word *and* between the adjectives to see if the phrase still seems natural. In the first sentence, “this tattered and woolen sweater” doesn’t sound right because you really aren’t talking about a sweater that is both tattered and woolen. It’s a *woolen sweater* that is *tattered*. *Woolen sweater* forms a unit of meaning that is modified by *tattered*.

Another way to test for coordinate adjectives is to try switching the order of the adjectives and seeing if the phrase still works. In the second sentence, you wouldn’t say “No one could open the silver old locket.” You can’t reverse the order of the adjectives because *silver locket* is a unit that is modified by *old*.

**Adjectives vs. adverbs**

As mentioned above, many of us learned in school that adjectives modify nouns and that adverbs modify verbs. But as we’ve seen, adjectives can also act as complements for linking verbs. This leads to a common type of error: incorrectly substituting an adverb in place of a predicate adjective. An example you’ve probably heard before is:

I feel **badly** about what happened.

Because “feel” is a verb, it seems to call for an adverb rather than an adjective. But “feel” isn’t just any verb; it’s a linking verb. An adverb would describe *how* you perform the action of feeling—an adjective describes *what* you feel. “I feel badly” means that you are bad at feeling things. If you’re trying to read Braille through thick leather gloves, then it might make sense for you to say “I feel badly.” But if you’re trying to say that you are experiencing negative emotions, “I feel bad” is the phrase you want.

It’s easier to see this distinction with a different linking verb. Consider the difference between these two sentences:

Goober smells badly.

Goober smells bad.

“Goober smells badly” means that Goober, the poor thing, has a weak sense of smell. “Goober smells bad” means Goober stinks—poor us.

**When nouns become adjectives and adjectives become nouns**

One more thing you should know about adjectives is that, sometimes, a word that is normally used as a noun can function as an adjective, depending on its placement. For example:

Never try to pet someone’s **guide** dog without asking permission first.

*Guide* is a noun. But in this sentence, it modifies *dog*. It works the other way, too. Some words that are normally adjectives can function as nouns:

James is working on a fundraiser to help the **homeless**.

In the context of this sentence, *homeless* is functioning as a noun. It can be hard to wrap your head around this if you think of adjectives and nouns only as particular classes of words. But the terms “adjective” and “noun” aren’t just about a word’s form—they’re also about its function.

**Adjective usage advice**

We’ll end with a few words about adjectives and style. It’s one thing to know how to use an adjective; it’s another to know when using one is a good idea. Good writing is precise and concise. Sometimes, you need an adjective to convey exactly what you mean. It’s hard to describe a red sports car without the word “red.” But, often, choosing the right noun eliminates the need to tack on an adjective. Is it a big house, or is it a mansion? A large crowd, or a throng? A mixed-breed dog, or a mutt? A dark night, or just . . . night? Always remember to make every word count in your writing. If you need an adjective, use it. But if it’s not pulling its weight, delete it.

**Adjective and Verb Placement: Grammar Rules**

Adjectives are usually placed before the nouns they modify, but when used with linking verbs, such as forms of *to be* or “sense” verbs, they are placed after the verb. The latter type of adjective is called a predicative adjective.

In these simple sentences, the adjectives *wild, long,* and *furious* follow forms of the verb *to be*:

The rock star was wild .

The cat’s tail is long .

I am furious with my business partner.

“Sense” verbs, such as *look, seem, appear, taste, sound, feel,* or *smell*, also demand a verb + adjective word order:

The cookies smell awesome !

That shirt looks great on you.

**When Verbs Become Adjectives: Participles**

Perhaps you are feeling that the relationship between verbs and adjectives is complicated enough, but consider that verbs can also become adjectives by turning into participles. These are verb forms ending in *‑ing* (present participles) or *-ed* or *-en* (past participles) that are used to modify nouns.

The smiling baby is really cute.

The present participle *smiling* is used as an adjective here, as is cute.

This is my new washing machine.

*Washing* is acting as an adjective for *machine*.

This is my broken washing machine.

This washing machine is broken .

In both these instances, *broken* is an adjective modifying *washing machine*.

I gave my boyfriend an engraved watch.

Here, the past participle *engraved* is acting as an adjective modifying *watch*.

For more information about adjectives, check out [Adjectives: Definitions, Rules, and Examples](https://www.grammarly.com/blog/adjective/) in our Grammarly Blog.

https://www.grammarly.com/blog/adjective/

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