**Adjectives – Reading Material**

**Overview:**

Describe a feeling Express a judgement

Tell about a thing's characteristics

But just ensure you do it right.

**Objectives:**

This reading material is designed to help you:

* Convey a sense of which, what kind or how many/much
* Apply adjectives in the right order.

**Adjectives: Sticky Situation**

As a teacher of English as a foreign language, I've developed a bit of an aversion to adjectives. Show me too many and I break out into a prolonged, painful and unpleasant rash. Or should that be painful, prolonged and unpleasant? Or...?

We all have lessons that we feel obliged to teach which, we know for sure, will create all sorts of problems that will need to be cleared up later. Sometimes you wonder if it is even worth the effort in the first place. A humble lesson on the correct order of adjectives is one such. It usually starts with the best of intentions: students have (perhaps) reached the stage when they want to use, or are expected to use, more than one adjective in front of a noun.

All well and good, for it is better to say *delicious, sticky fudge* than to say *sticky, delicious fudge*. Even more important for their development as language learners is that they are being extravagant with their adjectives, though they are likely to get a bit flustered when faced with reordering the adjectives in *homemade, hot, tasty apple pie* (not when they've just dealt with the fudge — they might be confused, but they are not greedy. )

You may wonder what the problem is. We are perfectly well aware that there is an accepted order for adjective types preceding the noun (though we should remember that in about

60% of world languages, the adjectives follows the noun, so there is a built in problem for many students to start with). Adjective order appears in neat little charts or tables, and often refers to them as the "Royal Order of Adjectives."

Charts and tables usually have course book writers salivating with anticipation — there is nothing like a fair sprinkling of tables in the course book to make it look professional and suitably academic. Many students react well to language being laid out in this manner. Perhaps it seems to offer a perceived order to what otherwise can appear so complex that it borders on chaos.

For the same reason, many students find safety in browsing grammar tables, and (too many) teachers find solace in teaching them. They lend themselves to orderly lessons where clear objectives can be set out and achieved and, most importantly, that achievement measured as ranks of adjectives are sorted and graded and put into the correct order. This mechanism is useful in the classroom for the reasons given above but also because it allows reflection on the precise meaning of words and their place within subjective or objective meaning. This is an essential skill for language learners to achieve as it gives them an insight into the minutiae of how we use language — something that is often taken for granted in the use of a first language.

All that sounds quite positive, I suspect, and I have hardly given a hint of why it causes me and a lot of my students problems over the years. What bothers me can be reduced to the old battles between accuracy versus fluency and accuracy versus authenticity. You can always tell when students have been burning the midnight oil and poring over tables of adjective order because they will turn up in class and proudly prefix every noun that they can lay their hands on with multiple adjectives. There will always be a minimum of three adjectives, occasionally an alarming four, but they will be certain to be in the right order, and, if appearing in a spoken sentence, you can also hear the comma in between each being articulated.

Now, on one level, this is wonderful: your students have grappled with a language issue and conquered it. Except they haven't — the language has conquered them. We should never forget that it is supposed to be the students who are command of the language and not the other way round. While they may be producing very accurate models of adjective-noun groupings, they are hardly likely to sound fluent while doing it, and this is because it is not authentic. Though it is not wrong to use three or more adjectives to puff up a noun, it is actually pretty unusual in everyday speech or writing. The end result is making the articulator sound less authentic rather more, which presumably had been their intention when they relentless memorized the order of *Observation, Size, Shape, Age, Color, Origin, Material, Qualifier, Noun*.

The solution is to be brutally honest and, after they have learned this, explain that we tend to be quite selective in our use of adjectives. Two would be a normal maximum unless the speaker/writer was being theatrical or striving for effect, and that if more was wanted then different constructions might be employed. For example, we would be unlikely to say (with a straight face, anyway) *a fast, powerful, blue, German sports car*. To begin with, the color of the car is something of the odd one out here, as three of the adjectives suggest potency (four, if you consider German made products to be so) so an authentic sounding phrase would omit this, or arrange the information into new clauses: *that blue, German made sports car is fast and powerful*, although *blue* is technically redundant, as it might suggest that the red sports car wasn't fast and powerful.

The message here is that if we want to give all this information in one event, we tend to reorder the way we do it, and don't simply rely on adjective order. I always advise my students not to use more than two adjectives at any one time unless they are firmly convinced that three is going to get their message across better while sounding authentic, and that three only usually works — as in the car example above — when we include origin and a qualifier, *German* and *sports*, in this case.

It is also a good to consider the use of adverbs to qualify adjectives. This is not only a good authentic use of qualifying a noun, it naturally tends to limit the number of adjectives used. If we do this then we are likely to end up with *unbelievably sticky fudge*, *incredibly tasty apple pie* and *impressively fast sports car*, all of which sounds like wonderfully authentic language.

The message, then, is to beware when you are enticed by one of those attractive, brightly colored tables of adjective orders . It can open up a whole host of issues that won't be dealt with lightly and you have to be ready for a difficult, frustrating, lengthy time ahead.

**Order of Adjectives**

An adjective is a word that describes, identifies, modifies, or quantifies something (a noun or a pronoun). In the phrase, "the **black** cat" the word black is an adjective because it describes the cat.

In English, an adjective usually comes before the noun it pertains to (for example, a red apple or a cute cat.).

Adjectives can be classified into many categories. In English, adjectives are generally used in the order: **quantity-->opinion-->size-->age-->shape-->color-->origin-->material-->purpose**. Some of these categories are (roughly in the order in which adjectives are used in English):

 **quantity** - few, no, one, two, three, four, little, several, many, all, some, every, each,

...

 **opinion** - good, better, best, bad, worse, worst, wonderful, splendid, mediocre, awful, fantastic, pretty, ugly, clean, dirty, wasteful, difficult, comfortable, uncomfortable, valuable, worthy, worthless, useful, useless, important, evil, angelic, rare, scarce, poor, rich, lovely, disgusting, amazing, surprising, loathesome, unusual, usual, pointless, pertinent, ...

 **personality/emotion** - happy, sad, excited, scared, frightened, outgoing, funny, sad,

zany, grumpy, cheerful, jolly, carefree, quick-witted, blissful, lonely, elated, ...

 **sound** - loud, soft, silent, vociferous, screaming, shouting, thunderous, blaring, quiet, noisy, talkative, rowdy, deafening, faint, muffled, mute, speechless, whispered, hushed, ...

 **taste** - sweet, sour, acidic, bitter, salty, tasty, delicious, savory, delectable, yummy,

bland, tasteless, palatable, yummy, luscious, appetizing, tasteless, spicy, watery, ...

 **touch** - hard, soft, silky, velvety, bumpy, smooth, grainy, coarse, pitted, irregular, scaly, polished, glossy, lumpy, wiry, scratchy, rough, glassy, ...

 **size, weight** - heavy, light, big, small, little, tiny, tall, short, fat, thin, slender, willowy, lean, svelte, scrawny, skeletal, underweight, lanky, wide, enormous, huge, vast, great, gigantic, monstrous, mountainous, jumbo, wee, dense, weighty, slim, trim, hulking, hefty, giant, plump, tubby, obese, portly, ...

 **smell** - perfumed, acrid, putrid, burnt, smelly, reeking, noxious, pungent, aromatic,

fragrant, scented, musty, sweet-smelling,...

 **speed** - quick, fast, slow, speeding, rushing, bustling, rapid, snappy, whirlwind, swift, hasty, prompt, brief, ...

 **temperature** - hot, cold, freezing, icy, frigid, sweltering, wintry, frosty, frozen, nippy, chilly, sizzling, scalding, burning, feverish, fiery, steaming, ...

 **age** - young, old, baby, babyish, teenage, ancient, antique, old-fashioned, youthful,

elderly, mature, adolescent, infantile, bygone, recent, modern, ...

 **distance** - short, long, far, distant, nearby, close, faraway, outlying, remote, far-flung, neighboring, handy, ...

 **shape** - round, circular, square, triangular, oval, sleek, blobby, flat, rotund, globular, spherical, wavy, straight, cylindrical, oblong, elliptical, zigzag, squiggly, crooked, winding, serpentine, warped, distorted, ...

 **miscellaneous qualities**- full, empty, wet, dry, open, closed , ornate, ...

 **brightness** - light, dark, bright, shadowy, drab, radiant, shining, pale, dull, glowing, shimmering, luminous, gleaming, ...

 **color** - pink, red, orange, yellowish, dark-green, blue, purple, black, white, gray, brown, tanned, pastel, metallic, silver, colorless, transparent, translucent, ...

 **time** - early, late, morning, night, evening, everlasting, initial, first, last, overdue, belated, long-term, delayed, punctual, ...

 **origin/location** - lunar, northern, oceanic, polar, equatorial, Floridian, American, Spanish, Canadian, Mexican, French, Irish, English, Australian, ...

 **material** - glass, wooden, cloth, concrete, fabric, cotton, plastic, leather, ceramic, china, metal, steel, silicon, ...

 **purpose** - folding, swinging, work, racing, cooking, sleeping, dance, rolling, walking,

...

**Good versus Well**

In both casual speech and formal writing, we frequently have to choose between the adjective *good* and the [**adverb**](http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/definitions.htm#adverb) *well*. With most verbs, there is no contest: when modifying a verb, use the adverb.

He swims well.

He knows only too well who the murderer is.

However, when using a [**linking verb**](http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/verbs.htm#linking) or a verb that has to do with the five human senses, you want to use the adjective instead.

How are you? I'm feeling good, thank you. After a bath, the baby smells so good.

Even after my careful paint job, this room doesn't look good.

Many careful writers, however, will use *well* after linking verbs relating to health, and this is perfectly all right. In fact, to say that you are *good* or that you feel *good* usually implies not only that you're OK physically but also that your spirits are high.

"How are you?"

"I am well, thank you."

**Bad versus Badly**

When your cat died (assuming you loved your cat), did you feel *bad* or *badly*? Applying the same rule that applies to *good* versus *well*, use the adjective form after verbs that have to do with human feelings. You felt *bad*. If you said you felt *badly*, it would mean that something was wrong with your faculties for feeling.

**Degrees of Adjectives**

Adjectives can express degrees of modification:

Savi is a *rich* woman, but Ritu is *richer* than Savi, and Anu is the *richest* woman in town.

The degrees of comparison are known as the **positive**, the **comparative**, and the **superlative**. (Actually, only the comparative and superlative show degrees.) We use the comparative for comparing two things and the superlative for comparing three or more things. Notice that the word *than* frequently accompanies the comparative and the word *the* precedes the superlative. The inflected suffixes *-er*and *-est* suffice to form most comparatives and superlatives, although we need *-ier* and *-iest* when a two-syllable adjective ends in *y* (happier and happiest); otherwise we use *more* and *most* when an adjective has more than one syllable.

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| --- | --- | --- |
| **Positive** | **Comparative** | **Superlative** |
| rich | richer | Richest |
| lovely | lovelier | Loveliest |
| beautiful | more beautiful | most beautiful |

Certain adjectives have irregular forms in the comparative and superlative degrees:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Irregular Comparative and Superlative Forms** | | |
| good | better | Best |
| bad | worse | Worst |
| little | less | Least |
| much  many some | more | Most |
| far | further | Furthest |

Be careful not to form comparatives or superlatives of adjectives which already express an extreme of comparison — *unique*, for instance — although it probably is possible to form comparative forms of most adjectives: something can be *more perfect*, and someone can have a *fuller* figure. People who argue that one woman cannot be *more pregnant* than another have never been nine-months pregnant with twins.