Adjectives are words that convey additional information about nouns. There are rules that dictate where an adjective appears in a sentence and the order adjectives should be listed in when using more than one. This handout will help you use adjectives correctly.

Basic Rules

Function
Adjectives modify nouns by specifying which, what kind, or how many.

Which: The oldest child is 10.

Note: The adjective “oldest” modifies the noun “child,” indicating which child the writer is referring to.

What kind: I live in a small house.

Note: The adjective “small” modifies the noun “house,” describing the kind of house the writer lives in.

How many: The student is taking five classes.

Note: The adjective “five” modifies the noun “classes,” specifying the number of courses the student is taking.

Number
Adjectives do not inflect for number. They are always in a “singular” form, even when the noun they modify is plural.

Modifying Singular Noun: The young child likes ice cream.

Modifying Plural Noun: The young children like ice cream.

Adjective Clauses and Phrases

Sometimes groups of words function as an adjective.

Adjective Clauses
If the group of words functioning as an adjective has a subject and a verb, it’s an adjective clause.

Example: My brother, who goes to college in California, is coming home to visit this weekend.
Adjective Phrases
If the subject and verb are removed from the group of words functioning as an adjective, it becomes an adjective phrase.

Example: She is the one who is leaving welcome baskets on new neighbors’ stoops.

Premodifiers
Premodifiers either intensify or downplay the degree of the adjective. They can be either single words or phrases.

Intensify: Dominick is so much friendlier now than when I knew him in high school.

Downplay: I did somewhat better on the GRE after taking the prep course.

Types of Adjectives

There are six different types of adjectives: descriptive, quantitative, demonstrative, possessive, interrogative, and indefinite adjectives.

Descriptive Adjectives
Descriptive adjectives describe the quality or kind of noun or pronoun that they modify.

Example: The blue vase fell.

Example: The red car is fast.

Quantitative Adjectives
Adjectives of quantity answer the question “how many” or “how much?”

Example: Roxy had ten candies.

Example: Dave has a lot of sons.

Demonstrative Adjectives
Demonstrative adjectives identify the specificity of the noun that they modify.

Example: I would like to buy this shirt.

Example: Sally shouldn’t wear those shoes.

Possessive Adjectives
Possessive adjectives show ownership or possession.

Example: I lost my pen.

Example: The meeting is in his office.
Interrogative Adjectives

Interrogative adjectives are used in statements or questions that seek specificity about the nouns they modify.

Example: What schools are in the university?
Example: Which flowers do you prefer?

Indefinite Adjectives

Indefinite adjectives refer to undefined numbers or quantities.

Example: The teacher worked at several schools.
Example: Most dogs are friendly.

Adjective Placement

Most adjectives can be placed either directly before the nouns they modify or after a linking verb in the predicate. When placed before a noun, the adjective is an attributive modifier. When placed after a linking verb, a verb that connects a subject to additional information about the subject (e.g., “be,” “feel,” “taste,” “smell,” “sound,” “look,” “appear,” “seem,” etc.), it is a predicative complement.

Attributive Use: The green frogs sat on a rotten log and croaked a long, sad song.

Note: “Green,” “rotten,” “long,” and “sad” appear before the nouns they modify, so they are attributive modifiers.

Predicative Use: The frogs are green, and they seem sad. They sound terrible!

Note: “Green,” “sad,” and “terrible” come after linking verbs, so they are predicative complements.

Attributive-only Adjectives

However, some adjectives can only be used attributively. These include adjectives of degree, location, quantity, and time.

Adjective of Degree (Incorrect): The disaster was utter.
Adjective of Degree (Correct): It was an utter disaster.

Adjective of Location (Incorrect): Her leg is right.
Adjective of Location (Correct): That is her right leg.

Adjective of Quantity (Incorrect): The pizza is entire.
Adjective of Quantity (Correct): We ate the entire pizza.

Adjective of Time (Incorrect): Her employee is former.
Adjective of Time (Correct): She is her former employee.

Predicative-only Adjectives

Other adjectives can only be used as predicative complements. These include adjectives with complements (e.g., infinitives or prepositional phrases) and adjectives that begin with “a.”
Adjective with Infinitive Complement (Incorrect): She is a ready to go woman.
Adjective with Infinitive Complement (Correct): The woman is ready to go.

Adjective with Prepositional Phrase Complement (Incorrect): That is a sick of it group.
Adjective with Prepositional Phrase Complement (Correct): The group is sick of it.

Adjective with “A-” Prefix (Incorrect): The alive man went home.
Adjective with “A-” Prefix (Correct): The man was alive.

Postpositive Adjectives
Finally, a small set of adjectives follow the nouns they modify. In this position, they are called postpositive adjectives.

Example: The letter was proof positive of her innocence.
Note: The adjective “positive” modifies “proof” and appears after the noun.

Example: After the first quarter, the company had several accounts payable.
Note: The adjective “payable” modifies “accounts” and appears after the noun. Other examples include “attorney general” and “notary public.”

Adjective Grade
Adjectives are gradable, meaning that they change forms when used in comparisons. There are three forms of grade: the plain, the comparative, and the superlative.

Plain Form
The plain form is simply the adjective itself.

Example: Sally is tall.
Example: Bill is tired.

Comparative Form
The comparative form means “more/less [adjective] than [object of comparison].” Comparatives are followed by “than.”

The comparative is formed either through inflection (i.e., a change in the form of the adjective) or by using “more” or “less” with the plain form of the adjective.

Inflection: She is faster than Sally.
More/Less: I am more educated than anyone in the room.

When a gerund or past participle acts as an adjective, it always combines with “more” or “less.”

Example: He is more interesting than John.
Example: I am less worried than you are.

Note: For more information on gerunds and past participles, please see our “Verbs” handout.

For adjectives of one syllable, add “-er.” If the one-syllable word ends in “e,” simply add “r.” If the one-syllable word ends with a vowel followed by a single consonant (e.g., “red”), double the final
consonant before adding “-er.”

**Example:** old → older  nice → nicer  red → redder

**Exceptions:** “cross,” “fake,” “ill,” “like” “loath,” “prime,” “real,” “right,” “worth,” “wrong”

For adjectives of two or more syllables, use “more” or “less” and the plain form.

**Example:** He is **more intelligent** than his brother.

However, some adjectives of two syllables inflect.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Two Syllable Comparatives</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>---</td>
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<tr>
<td>angry → angrier</td>
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<tr>
<td>dirty → dirtier</td>
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<td>early → earlier</td>
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<td>easy → easier</td>
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<td>funny → funnier</td>
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<tr>
<td>happy → happier</td>
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<tr>
<td>hungry → hungrier</td>
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<tr>
<td>noisy → noisier</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pretty → prettier</td>
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<tr>
<td>silly → sillier</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* While some inflectional forms are grammatically correct, they may not be commonly used (e.g., “wickeder”). If you are unsure of whether to use an inflectional form or “more” or “less,” consult a dictionary.

**Superlative Form**

The superlative form means “the most/least [adjective]” in comparison to a group. Superlatives are preceded by “the.”

Like the comparative, the superlative is formed either through inflection (i.e., a change in the word) or by using “most” or “least” with the plain form of the adjective.

**Inflection:** She is the **fastest** athlete on the field.

**More/Less:** I am the **most educated** person in the room.

Follow the rules for comparative forms listed above to form superlatives. Instead of adding “-er” or “r,” add “-est” or “-st.”

**Example:** That dog is the **smartest** I have ever seen.

**Example:** Sally is the **happiest** worker.
Irregular Comparatives and Superlatives

Some adjectives have irregular comparative and superlative forms. It is best to memorize them.

| Irregular Comparatives and Superlatives |
|-------------------------------|------------------|------------------|
| **Plain** | **Comparative** | **Superlative** |
| Good | Better | Best |
| Bad | Worse | Worst |
| Little | Less | Least |
| Much | More | Most |
| Far | Farther/Further | Farthest/Furthest |

Order of Adjectives

In English, there are rules that determine the specific order of adjectives.

When indefinite pronouns—such as something, someone, and anybody—are modified by an adjective, the adjective comes after the pronoun.

**Example:** Anyone early to orientation will receive something special.

**Example:** Hopefully, you will find someone nice to study with.

If the adjectives are describing a definite noun, the adjective appears before the noun.

**Example:** I completed the difficult test this morning.

**Example:** The generous professor assigned extra credit.

When multiple adjectives are used to describe the same noun, they follow a particular order based on the aspect of the noun they are describing. A chart demonstrating the order is available below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Order of Adjectives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Article or Possessive</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael's</td>
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<tr>
<td>The</td>
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<tr>
<td>A</td>
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<td>The</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Adjectives and Punctuation

**Coordinate Adjectives**

Coordinate adjectives are adjectives which describe the same noun. If the word “and” can be inserted between two adjectives, or if the order of the adjectives can be reversed, they need to be separated by a coma.

**Example:** Mrs. Elderberry is a kind, generous woman.
Note: You can tell that “kind” and “generous” are coordinate adjectives because you could write that Mrs. Elderberry is a “kind and generous woman” or a “generous and kind woman.”

Cumulative Adjectives
You do not need to use commas with cumulative adjectives—adjectives that build on each other to modify a noun. In other words, if the adjectives cannot be reordered, do not use commas.

Example: It is an ancient Mayan legend.

Note: You can tell that “ancient” and “Mayan” are cumulative adjectives because they build on each other. “Mayan” modifies “legend,” and “ancient” modifies the resulting phrase “Mayan legend.”

Articles as Adjectives
Since “a,” “an,” and “the” help to answer the questions of “which,” “what kind,” and “how many,” they are considered to be adjectives. They typically work in conjunction with other descriptors.

Example: I live in the yellow house.

Note: For more information on articles, please see our handout on this topic.

Collective Adjectives
Sometimes the article “the” is combined with another adjective used to describe a class or group of people. When this happens, the phrase formed can act as a noun. Collective nouns are generally singular. Collective adjectives are generally plural and therefore, require a plural noun.

Collective Noun: The audience was pleased with the performance as indicated by the standing ovation the performers received.

Collective Adjective: The rich were taxed at a higher rate than the poor.

References