

English Language Lesson: Modifiers – Adjectives and Adverbs

Nouns and verbs make straightforward statements about what things are and what they do. However, the world is not black and white – there are infinite details that need to be expressed. *Modifiers* give additional information about nouns, pronouns, verbs, and themselves to make those things more definite. There are two types of modifiers: *adjectives* and *adverbs*.

Adjectives

Adjectives are words that modify nouns and pronouns. Adjectives answer the questions: What kind? Which one? And how many?

What kind? *Yellow* balls, *endangered* species, *gigantic* tower

Which one? *His* girlfriend, *that* sofa, *whose* music

How many/much? *Both* books, *several* hours, *more* time

Adjectives may come before or after a noun. They may also come at the end of a sentence with a “to be” verb (see predicate adjectives, from parts of speech lesson).

Blue dolphins play in the Pacific.

The portrait, *priceless* to collectors, was stolen out of the museum last night.

Lipstick is *expensive*.

Types of adjectives

Adjectives can take several forms:

~Articles: Remember from the nouns lesson, the three articles *a*, *an*, and *the* are adjectives.

Example: Pass me *a* plate.

The digital camera was dropped and all the files were deleted.

~Titles: Mr., Mrs., Dr., Rev., Jr. and other name-modifiers are adjectives.

Example: *Mr.* Rogers had a children’s show with a train and puppet.

Mt. Kota Kinabalu is the tallest mountain in Java.

~Possessives: Just as there are possessive pronoun forms, there are possessive adjective forms.

These forms are *my*, *you*, *his*, *her*, *its*, *our*, *their*

Example: Lord Percival gambled all *his* money on horses.

The students fumbled for *their* textbooks.

~Comparative: Adjectives can indicate comparisons between relationships. Many adjectives have a comparative form indicating that something is better or more than something else and a superlative form indicating that something is the best or most.

Example:

Positive (Normal)	Comparative	Superlative
Good	Better	Best
Tall	Taller	Tallest
Bad	Worse	Worst

~Numbers: Numbers are classified as adjectives because they modify *how many* of a noun.

Example: There are *nine* eggs in that nest.

Sixteen children were caught in the blast.

~Nouns: Nouns can sometimes be used as adjectives if a noun is modifying another noun.

Example: The *cookie* jar was empty this morning.

The *mountain* range spread across the land.

~Demonstrative adjectives: The demonstrative pronouns (see noun lesson) can also be used as adjectives:

Example: *That* doctor is being sued for malpractice.

Don't put *those* apples in the pie; they have worms.

~Indefinite adjectives: Like indefinite pronouns (lesson 4), adjectives can express non-specific amounts:

Example: *No* girls are allowed in the boy's tree house.

I only donate *some* money to charity.

Over the past *few* weeks, I've seen *many* cats lurking in my neighborhood.

Adverbs

Adverbs are words that modify verbs, adjectives or other adverbs. Adverbs answer the questions how? When? Where? How much/To what extent?

How? Peter's heart beat *rapidly* when he saw the girl walk by.

When? *Immediately* after receiving the order, the troops began to March.

Where? The dog moved *backwards*.

How much/To what extent? Kim jumped *slightly* to the left.

Many adverbs can often be recognized by their -ly ending. Many adjectives can become adverbs with the addition of -ly.

She was *quick*. → She moved *quickly*.

The puppy looked *happy*. → The puppy wagged his tail *happily*.

Purposes of Adverbs

~ MANNER - these answer the question "how?"

Example: She speaks Italian *beautifully*.

He works *well*.

You must drive your car *carefully*.

Eat *quietly*.

~ PLACE - these answer the question "where?"

Example: We saw you *outside*.

We were sitting *here*.

We looked *everywhere*.

~ TIME - these answer the question "when?"

Example: *Afterwards* we decided to go by car.

I've done that journey *before*.

We haven't started *yet*.

He *still* wears old-fashioned clothes.

~ FREQUENCY - these answer the question "how many times?"

Example: She is *always* honest.

They *sometimes* spend the whole of Saturday fishing.

I have *often* wondered how they did that.

~ DEGREE - these answer the question "to what extent?"

Example: The bottle is *nearly* empty.

They should be able to pass their exams *quite* easily.

We had *almost* reached the hut when the rain started.

I am *just* beginning a new course.

~Like adjectives, adverbs can be comparative. Most adverbs are compared using “more” or “most.”

Quickly → more quickly → the most quickly

Happily → more happily → the most happily

Some adverbs (often the ones that do not end with -ly) can take the -er and -est.

Fast → faster → fastest

Adjective and Adverb Reminders:

1. Adjectives and adverbs are single words, but they can operate as phrases as well.

Example: The *blue* ball (single word)

“Blue” modifies “ball” - Answers question “what kind?”

The very blue ball (phrase)

“Blue” modifies “ball” - Answers question “what kind?”

“Very” modifies “blue” - “to what degree?”

Example: My use of adverbs is almost always perfect.

“Of adverb” modifies “use” – Answers question “what kind?”

“perfect” modifies “use” – Answers question “What kind?”

“Always” modifies “perfect” – Answers question “When?”

“Almost” modifies “always” – answers question “To what extent?”

My use (of adverbs) is (almost always perfect)

2. Some words function both as adverbs and as prepositions. See lesson 9 on prepositions for how to distinguish between the two.

3. “Here” and “there” are adverbs and cannot be the subject of the sentence:

Example: There is Jenny!

The subject of this sentence is “Jenny.” “There” modifies “is” by answering “where?”

Modifier errors

Misplaced Modifiers.

Modifying phrases must go next to the word that they modify. If a modifier is in the wrong place, the meaning of the sentence can change.

Adverb Example: My sister walked in as I was scrubbing the floor *with her new baby*.

The modifying phrase “with her new baby” should logically modify how the sister walked. The sister walked into the room together with her new baby. However, the modifier is closest to the verb “scrubbing.” What this sentence actually suggests is that I was using the baby to scrub the floor!

Corrected: My sister walked in with her new baby as I was scrubbing the floor.

Adjective Example: “One morning I shot an elephant *in my pajamas*.” –Groucho Marx

The modifying phrase “in my pajamas” should be modifying “I.” Logically, the speaker did the shooting while he was wearing his pajamas. However, the modifier is closest to the noun “elephant.” What the sentence actually says is that the elephant was in the pajamas.

Corrected, one morning, while in my pajamas, I shot an elephant.

Note: In some cases, you may have to add or change words to make the sentence make sense.

Dangling Modifiers

Modifying phrases must have a word to modify. A modifier cannot “dangle” alone in a sentence.

Example: *Having finished the assignment*, the tv was turned on.

The modifying phrase “Having finished the assignment” has nothing to modify. The only other noun in the sentence is “tv,” and clearly the tv didn’t finish an assignment.

Corrected: Having finished the assignment, Andy turned on the tv.

Example: The experiment was a failure, *not having studied the lab instructions carefully*.

The person or persons who failed to study the instructions is missing from the sentence.

Corrected: The class failed to study the lab instructions carefully and failed the experiment.

Use Caution!

Sometimes in a sentence, a modifier can logically modify more than one word. Be careful to specify which word is being modified.

Example: The family *nearly* lost everything in the tornado.

The family lost *nearly* everything in the tornado.

In the first example, the placement of “nearly” makes it an adverb, modifying “lost.” This sentence suggests that the family almost suffered lost, but did not. In the second example, “nearly” is an adjective modifying “everything.” This sentence suggests that the family lost a great deal – almost everything.

Note: In scholastic writing, one common modifier error occurs when the author of a story is used as an adjective, leaving the pronoun without an antecedent:

Example: In Tim O’Brien’s “The Things They Carried,” he writes about warfare.

The writer intends “he” to refer back to Tim O’Brien, but because the author was used as an adjective describing “The Things They Carried,” it’s difficult to tell to whom the pronoun refers.

Correction: In “The Things They Carried,” Tim O’Brien writes about warfare.