

[General Writing](#) • [Research and Citation](#) • [Teaching and Tutoring](#) • [Subject-Specific Writing](#) • [Job Search Writing](#) • [ESL](#)



*This page is brought to you by the OWL at Purdue (<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/>). When printing this page, you must include the entire legal notice at bottom.*

# The Difference between Adjectives and Adverbs

**Summary:** This worksheet discusses the differences between adjectives and adverbs. It defines adjectives and adverbs, shows what each can do, and offers several examples of each in use. Click [here](#) for some examples.

**Contributors:** Paul Lynch, Allen Brizee

**Last Edited:** 2010-09-21 01:33:47

## The Basic Rules: Adjectives

Adjectives modify nouns. To modify means to change in some way. For example:

- "I ate a meal." *Meal* is a noun. We don't know what kind of meal; all we know is that someone ate a meal.
- "I ate an enormous lunch." *Lunch* is a noun, and *enormous* is an adjective that modifies it. It tells us **what kind of** meal the person ate.

Adjectives usually answer one of a few different questions: "What kind?" or "Which?" or "How many?" For example:

- "The *tall* girl is riding a *new* bike." *Tall* tells us **which** girl we're talking about. *New* tells us **what kind of** bike we're talking about.
- "The *tough* professor gave us the *final* exam." *Tough* tells us **what kind of** professor we're talking about. *Final* tells us **which** exam we're talking about.
- "*Fifteen* students passed the midterm exam; *twelve* students passed the final exam." *Fifteen* and *twelve* both tell us **how many** students; *midterm* and *final* both tell us **which** exam.

So, generally speaking, adjectives answer the following questions:

- **Which?**
- **What kind of?**
- **How many?**

## The Basic Rules: Adverbs

Adverbs modify verbs, adjectives, and other adverbs. (You can recognize adverbs easily because many of them are formed by adding -ly to an adjective, though that is not always the case.) The most common question that adverbs answer is **how**.

Let's look at verbs first.

- "She sang *beautifully*." *Beautifully* is an adverb that modifies *sang*. It tells us **how** she sang.
- "The cellist played *carelessly*." *Carelessly* is an adverb that modifies *played*. It tells us **how** the cellist played.

Adverbs also modify adjectives and other adverbs.

- "That woman is *extremely* nice." *Nice* is an adjective that modifies the noun *woman*. *Extremely* is an adverb that modifies *nice*; it tells us **how** nice she is. **How** nice is she? She's extremely nice.
- "It was a *terribly* hot afternoon." *Hot* is an adjective that modifies the noun *afternoon*. *Terribly* is an adverb that modifies the adjective *hot*. **How** hot is it? Terribly hot.

So, generally speaking, adverbs answer the question **how**. (They can also answer the questions **when**, **where**, and **why**.)

## Some other rules:

Most of the time, adjectives come before nouns. However, they come after the nouns they modify, most often when the verb is a form of the following:

- be
- feel
- taste
- smell
- sound
- look
- appear
- seem

Some examples:

- "The dog is black." *Black* is an adjective that modifies the noun *dog*, but it comes after the verb. (Remember that "is" is a form of the verb "be.")
- "Brian seems sad." *Sad* is an adjective that modifies the noun *Brian*.
- "The milk smells rotten." *Rotten* is an adjective that modifies the noun *milk*.
- "The speaker sounds hoarse." *Hoarse* is an adjective that modifies the noun *speaker*.

Be sure to understand the differences between the following two examples:

"The dog smells carefully." Here, *carefully* describes **how** the dog is smelling. We imagine him sniffing very cautiously.

But:

"The dog smells clean." Here, *clean* describes the dog itself. It's not that he's smelling clean things or something; it's that he's had a bath and does not stink.