

Adjectives



Adapted from *The Little, Brown Handbook*, 11th Edition, Contributors Dayne Sherman, Jayetta Slawson, Natasha Whitton, and Jeff Wiemelt, 2010, 315-326.
Prepared by the Southeastern Writing Center. Last updated July, 2011.

An **adjective** modifies a noun or pronoun by providing descriptive or specific detail. Unlike adverbs, adjectives do not modify verbs, other adjectives, or adverbs. Adjectives usually precede the noun or pronoun they modify. Adjectives do not have to agree in number or gender with the nouns they describe. Adjectives answer the following questions: *What kind?*, *How many?*, or *Which ones?*

Example: Tom bought a **used** car. (*used* describes what kind of car Tom bought.)
Sally baked **ten** pies for the school bake sale. (*ten* tells how many pies Sally baked.)
Bob climbed **that** tree in the backyard. (*that* specifies which tree Bob climbed.)

Types of Adjectives

Descriptive Adjectives

A descriptive adjective names a quality of the noun or pronoun that it modifies.

Example: **brown** dog **bigger** house **fluffy** cat

Proper Adjectives

A proper adjective is derived from a proper noun.

Example: **French** class **Spanish** food **European** car

Limiting Adjectives

A limiting adjective restricts the meaning of the word it modifies.

Example: **that** car **this** room **the** tree

Interrogative Adjectives

An interrogative adjective is used to ask a question.

Example: **Whose** book is this?

Coordinate Adjectives

A coordinate adjective consists of two or more adjectives separated by a comma instead of by a coordinating conjunction.

Example: a **cold, rainy** day

To determine if you can replace the coordinating conjunction with a comma, see if the adjectives can be reversed or if *and* can be added between the adjectives without changing the meaning. If the adjectives can be reversed, they are coordinate and a comma can be used.

Example: The clowns arrived in a **bright, shiny** car.
The clowns arrived in a **shiny, bright** car. (Reversing *bright* and *shiny* does not change the meaning.)
The clowns arrived in a **bright and shiny** car. (Adding *and* between *bright* and *shiny* does not change the meaning.)

However, if the adjectives cannot be reversed or if *and* cannot be used, a comma cannot be used.

Example: The clowns arrived in **two colorful** cars.
The clowns arrived in **colorful two** cars. (Reversing *two* and *colorful* changes the meaning.)
The clowns arrived in **two and colorful** cars. (Adding *and* between *two* and *colorful* changes the meaning.)

Compound Adjectives

Compound adjectives consist of two or more words that function as a unit. Depending on its position within the sentence, the compound adjective is punctuated with or without a hyphen. When a compound adjective comes before the noun it modifies, use a hyphen to join the adjectives. When a compound adjective follows the noun it modifies, do not use a hyphen to join the adjectives.

Example: She is taking a class on **nineteenth-century** literature. (The adjective *nineteenth-century* precedes the noun *literature* so a hyphen is used.)

She is studying literature from the **nineteenth century**. (The adjective *nineteenth century* comes after the noun *literature* so no hyphen is used.)

Determiners as Adjectives

Determiners, such as articles, pronouns, and numbers, can function as adjectives. When a determiner is used as an adjective, it restricts the noun it modifies, like a limiting adjective. Determiners functioning as adjectives tell *Which one?*, *How many?*, and *Whose?*

Articles (*a, an, the*)

Possessive pronouns (*my, our, your, his, her, its, their*)

Relative pronouns (*whose, which, whichever, what, whatever*)

Demonstratives (*this, these, that, those*)

Indefinite pronouns (*any, each, other, some, etc.*)

Cardinal Numbers (*one, two, three, etc.*)

Ordinal Numbers (*last, first, second, etc.*)

Possessive proper nouns (*Bob's, Sarah's*)

Example: **Bob's** house is only **three** blocks from **that** house. (*Bob's* answers the question: Whose house? *Three* answers the question: How many blocks? *That* answers the question: Which house is three blocks from Bob's house?)

Placement and Order of Adjectives

A single noun can be described as a list of adjectives. When more than one adjective is used to modify a noun, it is important to consider the order in which the adjectives appear. Generally, the adjectives most important in completing the meaning of the noun are placed closest to the noun. Following is the usual order of adjectives in a series:

1. Determiners: articles (*a, the*), demonstratives (*this, those*), and possessives (*his, our, Mary's, everybody's*), amounts (*one, five, many, few*), order (*first, next last*)
2. Coordinate adjectives (subjective evaluations or personal opinions): *nice, nasty, packed, pitiful*
3. Adjectives describing size: *big, huge, little, tiny*
4. Adjectives describing shape: *long, short, round, square*
5. Adjectives describing age: *young, old, modern, ancient*
6. Adjectives describing color: *blue, green, red, white*
7. Adjectives describing nationality: *Italian, French, Japanese*
8. Adjectives describing architectural style or religion: *Greek, Gothic, Catholic, Jewish, Muslim*
9. Adjectives describing material: *cardboard, plastic, silver, gold*
10. Nouns functioning as adjectives: *soccer ball, cardboard box, history class*

Example: **a big brick** house (article, size, and material)
these old brown cardboard boxes (demonstrative, age, color, material)
a beautiful young Italian woman (article, personal opinion, age, nationality)

Using Adjectives

Adjectives as Subject Complements

The subject complement is a word that follows a linking verb and modifies the sentence's subject, not its verb. **Linking verbs:** *appear, become, believe, feel, grow, smell, seem, sound, remain, turn, prove, look, taste*, and the forms of the verb *to be*.

Example: The crowd appeared **calm**. (The linking verb *appeared* links the noun the subject crowd with the adjective **calm**)

Adjectives as Object Complements

The object complement is a word that follows a sentence's direct object and modifies that object and not the verb. An object complement answers the question *what?* after the direct object.

Example: Bob considered the experiment a **success**. (**Success** is the object compliment that modifies the sentences direct object *experiment*.)

Adjectives with Past and Present Participle Verbs

Adjectives are frequently formed by using the past participle (*-ed, -t, or -en*) and the present participle (*-ing*) verb forms.

Example: The group of children scared the **sleeping** dog. (*Sleeping* describes the baby.)
The students refused to eat the **dried** fruit. (*Dried* describes the cookies.)