

Lesson 6

Parts of Speech: Adjectives and Articles

Adjectives modify (describe, explain, tell something about) nouns and pronouns. The adjectives in the following sentences do this job whether they come before or after the words they modify and whether they are truly adjectives or are nouns working as adjectives:

The Burnaby office has received *another* payment from that customer.
A more attractive desk is earmarked for Ms. Brophy's fourth-floor office.
We are proud of your outstanding performance in many competitions.

These sentences would be much less descriptive without adjectives telling which, what kind of, and what. (Although possessive pronouns, such as *your*, seem to function as adjectives, they are classified as pronouns.)

Observe that the adjectives in these sentences fall into three categories: purely descriptive (such as *outstanding* and *more attractive*), limiting (such as *many*), and pointing (such as *that*). Descriptive adjectives are probably the easiest to identify in any sentence; they are words like *cold*, *impatient*, *useful*, *good*. Limiting adjectives are a little more difficult to pick out, but numbers and such words as *most*, *several*, and *no* are often used to specify quantity or amount. The pointing adjectives are *this*, *that*, *these*, and *those*. The sentences also contain articles: *a*, *an*, and *the*.

In the following exercises, underline all the adjectives and articles:

1. A pleasant surprise awaits you for taking advantage of our fantastic offer.
2. The newest accountant on our headquarters staff is a 1999 graduate of the most prestigious university in a neighboring province.
3. She slowly rose to speak to the assembled delegates.
4. Their approach is best described as a useful combination of grand design and careful execution.
5. The colour photographs in that brochure were expensive.

Adjectives change form when they are used to compare items:

<i>One Item</i>	<i>Two Items</i>	<i>Three or More Items</i>
large	larger	largest
easy	easier	easiest
far	farther	farthest
good	better	best
bad	worse	<i>worst</i>
little	less	least
some	more	most
beautiful	more beautiful	most beautiful

As you can see from this list, simple adjectives like *large* add the ending *er* when comparing two items and *est* when comparing three or more items. This is the normal pattern. Other *words, such as good*, are irregular.

And words with three or more syllables use *more* and *most*, instead of the word endings, to make comparisons.

Some adjectives cannot be used to make comparisons because they themselves indicate the extreme. For example, if something is perfect, nothing can be more perfect. If something is unique or ultimate, nothing can be more unique or more ultimate.

In the following exercises, fill in the appropriate form of the adjectives that are supplied for you:

6. Of the two products, this one has the (*great*) _____ potential.
7. The (*perfect*) _____ solution is *d*.
8. Here is the (*interesting*) _____ of all the ideas I have heard so far.
9. Our service is (*good*) _____ than theirs.
10. The (*hard*) _____ part of my job is firing people.

Many adjectives used in the business world are actually combinations of words: *up-to-date* report, *last-minute* effort, *fifth-floor* suite, *well-built* engine. As you can see, they are hyphenated when they come before the noun they modify. However, when they come after the noun they modify, they are not hyphenated: the report is *up to date*, an effort made at the *last minute*, a suite on the *fifth floor*, an engine that is *well built*.

Hyphens are not used when part of the combination is a word ending in *ly* (because the word ending in *ly* usually modifies the adjective): a rapidly *shrinking* reserve, a highly *motivated* employee.

A hyphen is also omitted from combinations of words that are used frequently: *credit card* account, *data processing* department.

In the following exercises, insert hyphens wherever required:

11. A highly placed source revealed Dotson's last ditch efforts to cover up the mistake.
12. Please send a replacement that is large enough for me.
13. A top secret document was taken from the president's office last night.
14. A 30 year old person should know better.
15. If I write a large scale report, I want to know that it will be read by upper level management.

Adjectives often pile up in front of a noun, like this:

The superficial, obvious answer was the one she gave.
 The most valuable animal on the ranch is a small black horse.

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The question is whether a comma should be used to separate the adjectives. The answer? Use a comma when the two adjectives independently modify the noun; do not use a comma when one of the adjectives is closely identified with the noun. In the first example above, the answer was both superficial and obvious. But in the second example, the black horse is small.

Another way for you to think about this problem is to use the word *and* as a replacement for the comma.

Here is another example for you to study:

We recommend a diet of leafy green vegetables.

We recommend a diet of green, leafy vegetables.

Because some green vegetables are not leafy (cucumbers and zucchini, for example), it is correct to leave out the comma in the first example so that you know which kind of green vegetables are being discussed. But because all leafy vegetables are also green (green and leafy), the comma must be included in the second example. Again:

He is an angry young man.

He is an angry, dangerous man.

There is a difference between a young man who is angry and a man who is angry and dangerous.

Another device for deciding whether to use a comma is to try switching the adjectives. If the order of the adjectives can be reversed without changing the meaning of the phrase, you should use a comma. If the order cannot be reversed, you should not use a comma. For example:

Here's our simplified credit application.

Here's our simplified, easy-to-complete application.

Here's our easy-to-complete, simplified application.

A credit application may be simple or complex; at any rate, you cannot talk about a *credit, simplified application*. The application in the second and third examples, however, is both simplified and easy to complete, however you arrange the words.

In the following exercises, insert required commas between adjectives:

16. The two companies are engaged in an all-out no-holds-barred struggle for dominance.

17. A tiny metal shaving is responsible for the problem.

18. She came to the office with a bruised swollen knee.

19. A chipped cracked sheet of glass is useless to us.

20. You'll receive our usual cheerful prompt service.

In these last exercises, insert both hyphens and commas as necessary:

21. It was one of the first high tech colleges in the country.

22. Joan is the stern mother hen of a busy tightly run office.

23. Energy wasting unnecessary trips must be eliminated.
24. The new past due notices will go out with today's mail.
25. If a broken down unproductive guy like Carl can get a raise why can't a take charge guy like me get one?

If you want to learn more about adjectives and articles, consult a grammar book on the following topics:

absolute adjectives	coordinate adjectives	limiting adjectives
comparative adjectives	descriptive adjectives	pointing adjectives
compound adjectives	independent adjectives	proper adjectives

You may also wish to consult Sections 1.4, "Adjectives," and 1.6.2, "Conjunctions, Articles, and Interjections," in The "Handbook, Fundamentals of Grammar and Usage," in *Excellence in Business Communication*.

Lesson 6: Check Your Answers

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