

Grammar Lesson 3: Adjectives and Adverbs

3.1 Modifiers

In grammar, a **modifier** is a grammatical unit that changes the meaning of another word by adding information about it or describing it. Look at the two sentences below:

Odysseus stole the urn.

Odysseus stole the brazen urn.

The word “brazen” *modifies* the word urn by giving the reader more information about the urn.

Adjectives and adverbs are both categories of modifiers; articles are as well. And as we go further along in our study of grammar, we will learn about how more complex grammatical units such as phrases or clauses can also be modifiers.

Modifiers are not necessary for the sentence to make sense grammatically; in other words, you can remove them, and the sentence will still function.

3.2 Adjectives

3.2.1 Definition

Adjectives are words that modify (or describe) nouns or pronouns. They often answer the following questions:

- *What kind?*
- *How many/much?*
- *Which one?*



Look at the sentences below and determine what question the underlined adjective is answering:

- Kelvin was ambling through the mall, enjoying window shopping, when he decided to buy those shoes.
- The Queen only wears sumptuous fabrics: silks, velvet, and satin.
- I was aghast to discover twenty cockroaches crawling all over the kitchen counter.

3.2.2 Attributive vs. Predicative Adjectives

We can break adjectives apart into two classes based on their position in a sentence. If an adjective is *next to* the noun or pronoun that is modifying, it is called an **attributive adjective**.

The relentless noise from the apartment next door was driving Mathias crazy.

The adjective “relentless” is right next to the noun that it is modifying – “noise.”

On the other hand, if an adjective modifies a noun through the use of a verb (a linking verb!), it is called a **predicative adjective**.

The noise from the apartment next door was relentless, and it drove Mathias crazy.

In the sentences below, circle all of the adjectives and draw arrows to the nouns or pronouns that they are modifying. Then label the adjectives as either “attributive” or “predicative.” If an adjective is predicative, draw a square around the linking verb that connects it to the noun or pronoun. (Some sentences may contain more than one adjective.)

1. Odysseus was shrewd.
2. Odysseus was a shrewd leader.
3. After the only space craft on Mars exploded, the attempt to return to Earth appeared futile.
4. The movie was rated R for obscene language.
5. Tea becomes potent if you let it steep for a long time.
6. Marianne tied a hammock to the gnarled branches of the tree.
7. A quinceañera is a lavish celebration.
8. The baby’s cheeks turn ruddy when she is crying.
9. The broken air-conditioning unit made the school feel infernal.
10. The principal wore a grave expression as she told the students that they were in trouble.
11. There is a grisly scene in *Jurassic Park* where the T-Rex eats a man.
12. After a nap, I felt mellow and relaxed.
13. Rachel felt indignant after hearing Marco’s insolent remark.
14. Merula gave Benny a snide look and laughed after he missed a question in class.
15. The ninja assassin was deft with her knife.
16. If someone burps accidentally, a gallant response is to not say anything to help them avoid embarrassment.
17. The coral reef became barren as a result of pollution.
18. Poker players look for “tells” in their opponents – subtle clues like a twitch or a cough that indicate bluffing.
19. My brother is a steadfast patron of HEB and refuses to shop at any other store.
20. The suave ballroom dancer twirled his partner around and then literally swept her off her feet.

3.2.3 Comparative and Superlative Adjectives

Some adjectives give information about the noun they are modifying in relation to other things. According to the number of syllables in the adjective, you will either change the word itself or add “more” or “most” in front of it.

kind of adjective	comparative	superlative
one syllable	add “er,” “ier,” or “r” to the end of the word	add “est,” “iest,” or “st” to the end of the word
two syllables	add “er,” “ier,” or “r” to the end of the word (usually)	add “est,” “iest,” or “st” to the end of the word (usually)
three syllables	add “more” in front of the word	add “most” in front of the word

Look at the sentences below and choose the form of the correct form of the comparative or superlative adjective.

1. Athena is much (shrewder / more shrewd) than her brother Ares.
2. The wedding of the prince and the prince was the (sumptuosest / most sumptuous) event that the kingdom had ever seen.
3. Wasting someone's time is the (subtlest / most subtle) form of murder.
4. Antarctica is the (desolatest / most desolate) continent in the world.
5. The lands of Russia are (vaster / more vast) than those of Luxembourg.
6. Many animals have a (keener / more keen) sense of smell than humans.
7. Prescription medicine is usually (potenter / more potent) than over-the-counter medications.

There are also some irregular comparative and superlative adjectives that change form completely:

adjective	comparative	superlative
good	better	best
bad	worse	worst
little	less	least
much	more	most
far	farther/further	farthest/furthest



3.2.3.1 “farther” vs. “further”

The words “farther” and “further” (as well as “farthest” and “furthest”) are often used interchangeably, but there is actually a distinction in meaning: **“farther” refers to literal, physical distance, while “further” indicates metaphorical distance.** For example:

- It is farther from Houston to Dallas than it is from Houston to Austin.
- If you are in ninth grade, you have much further to go in your studies.

Choose the correct form of the adjective in the sentences below:

1. Even though Odysseus already had traveled hundreds of miles, he had much (farther / further) to go before he would reach Ithaca.
2. When Odysseus was with Circe, Penelope appeared to be the (farthest / furthest) person from his mind.
3. Telemachus has much (father / further) to go to win the respect of the people of Ithaca.
4. The mouth of Hades was the (farthest / furthest) destination to which the crew had ever travelled.

3.2.4 Demonstrative Adjectives

Demonstrative adjectives answer the question “which one?” about the nouns and pronouns that they modify. The demonstrative adjectives in English are as follows:

	<i>singular</i>	<i>plural</i>
<i>near</i>	this	these
<i>far</i>	that	those

In the sentences below, circle the demonstrative adjective and draw an arrow to the word that it is modifying.

1. These children are terrified because they have seen a wraith!
2. "I want this party to be lavish," said the movie star.
3. That potent drug is Circe's favorite.
4. The Greeks worshipped those gods in hallowed temples.

However, these four words – "this," "that," "these," and "those" – can also function as other parts of speech. We will learn about those other possibilities later; for now, determine if the word is functioning as a demonstrative adjective by figuring out if it is modifying a noun or a pronoun.

In the sentences below, determine whether the underlined word is a demonstrative adjective or not a demonstrative adjective. If it *is* a demonstrative adjective, draw an arrow to the word that it's modifying.

1. Monica loves classical music and is a connoisseur of that genre.
2. Those infernal mosquitoes make picnics miserable!
3. The land was both barren and desolate, and these were only the beginning of the problems in establishing a civilization there.
4. That is an insolent thing to say, and you should apologize.
5. "I want those!" the little girl keened and wailed, pointing to the bins of candy.
6. I believe that that man is a barbarian – he has terrible manners.
7. I find this intriguing and would like to learn more.
8. Some street art is beautiful, but this graffiti is obscene!
9. These children have ruddy cheeks because they have been playing in the snow.
10. Those who are callous and snide to others should not be surprised when they don't have any friends.

3.2.5 Indefinite Adjectives

Indefinite adjectives modify nouns in a general sense; while demonstrative adjectives point out one specific instance of a noun, indefinite adjectives refer to a range of possible instances of the noun. Some common indefinite adjectives include:

- | | | | |
|-----------|----------|-----------|-----------|
| • all | • either | • neither | • most |
| • another | • enough | • one | • much |
| • any | • few | • other | • several |
| • each | • most | • many | • some |

Just as with demonstrative adjectives, these words can sometimes be used as parts of speech other than adjectives. In the sentences below, determine whether the underlined word is an indefinite adjective or not an indefinite adjective. If it is an indefinite adjective, draw an arrow to the word that it's modifying.

1. Out of all of the Greek gods and goddesses, Athena is the shrewdest.
2. After the Cyclops rolled the boulder in front of the cave's exit, Odysseus strove to find another escape.
3. As they feasted in the great hall, the suitors did not have any idea of the grave fate that awaited them.
4. Each wraith begged Odysseus for a sip of the blood of the sacrificial ram.
5. Circe told Odysseus that he could sail through the Clashing Rocks or by Scylla and Charybdis, but either route would lead to the deaths of some men.
6. Circe told Odysseus that if he made a sacrifice to the sea god, that would be enough for Poseidon to forgive his transgressions.
7. Few would be strong enough to endure the hardships that Odysseus survived.
8. Most people would be aghast at the horror and bloodshed after the battle in the great hall of the palace of Ithaca.
9. Both Circe and Calypso tried to convince Odysseus to stay with them, but neither goddess could persuade him to abandon his kin.
10. Circe told the sailors that there was one transgression they must not commit; to eat the cattle of the Sun God meant certain death.
11. Penelope was racked with longing for her husband when she heard that all of the other Greek soldiers who had survived the war had returned to their homes in Greece.
12. The suitors made many snide remarks about Telemachus, and the prince swore he would get revenge.
13. Odysseus and Telemachus had much to do to prepare for their scheme to kill the suitors.
14. Odysseus executed several maids for making a pact with the suitors to betray Penelope.

3.2.6 Possessive Adjectives

Possessive adjectives modify nouns and pronouns by indicating belonging. Possessive adjectives are formed by adding an apostrophe and the letter “s” to the end of a noun. Although you might have heard that when a name already ends in “s,” you should only add an apostrophe, the two major style guides – MLA and APA – state that this is incorrect; when a name ends in “s,” you should still add an apostrophe and another “s.” In the sentences below, circle the possessive adjectives and draw arrows to the words they are modifying.

1. Telemachus is Odysseus's son.
2. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are Homer's most famous works.
3. The Greeks plundered the Trojans' treasures.

3.2.7 Adjectives and Commas

When you have more than one adjective modifying a noun or pronoun, you sometimes need to separate those adjectives using commas.

- **Coordinate adjectives** occur in a list whose meaning stays the same, even when the adjectives are rearranged. You need to separate these with commas.
- **Noncoordinate adjectives** occur when the list must retain its order to preserve its meaning. You do not need to separate these with commas.

Consider this sentence:



Odysseus sipped the ruddy, mellow wine.

The adjectives “ruddy” and “mellow” could be reversed and the sentence would still be grammatically sound. You therefore need to separate those adjectives with commas. On the other hand, consider this sentence:

The devious Greek witch was appalled when he failed to turn into a pig.

The sentence would sound wrong if you reversed the order of those adjectives and said, “The Greek devious witch....” Therefore, you do *not* separate those adjectives with commas.

The reason why reversing the order of some adjectives sounds incorrect is that we have an order (called the Royal Order of Adjectives) for the different kinds of adjectives that most of us naturally use:

 THE ROYAL ORDER OF ADJECTIVES 									
Determiner	Observation	Physical Description				Origin	Material	Qualifier	Noun
		Size	Shape	Age	Color				
a	beautiful			old		Italian		touring	car
an	expensive			antique			silver		mirror
four	gorgeous		long-stemmed		red		silk		roses
her			short		black				hair
our		big		old		English			sheepdog
those			square				wooden	hat	boxes
that	dilapidated	little						hunting	cabin
several		enormous		young		American		basketball	players
some	delicious					Thai			food

(from guidetogrammar.org)

When you have multiple adjectives *from the same category*, you can change the order of those adjectives (and you need to separate them with commas). Look at the sentence below:

Athena is a wise, powerful, and beautiful goddess.

The adjectives “wise,” “powerful,” and “beautiful” all fall under the category of observations; you can rearrange their order and the sentence still “sounds” correct. But look at this sentence:

Paris is a foolish young Trojan prince.

The word “foolish” is an observation, but “young” refers to age, and “Trojan” describes his origin. If you rearranged this set of adjectives, it would “sound” wrong, which is why you do *not* separate them using commas.

Place commas where necessary to separate the adjectives in the sentences below:

1. A beautiful blue silk veil shrouded Helen’s face so that she could escape from Menelaus’s palace.
2. That barren desolate vast land in Turkey was once the site of the thriving Trojan civilization.
3. Achilles yoked his four magnificent white horses to his chariot.
4. Odysseus gripped the oar in his gnarled calloused hands.
5. Penelope, Odysseus’s clever patient wife, strove to maintain order in their home in Ithaca.
6. Hector was daunted when he saw Achilles, that fearsome demi-mortal Greek hero.

3.2.7 Overuse of Adjectives in Writing

An important principle of effective writing is to choose strong, specific nouns instead of modifying vague nouns with adjectives to make them more specific. Look at the two sentences below:

- Odysseus had a cunning plan to destroy the suitors.
- Odysseus had a scheme to destroy the suitors.

A “scheme” *is* a “cunning plan.” Choosing a more specific noun allows you to communicate more efficiently (that is, in fewer words). It also makes it easier for your reader to understand your meaning. Consider these examples:

- After watching the battle, Priam, the king of Troy, returned to his vast, lavish home.
- After watching the battle, Priam, the king of Troy, returned to his palace.

The first sentence asks the reader to begin by imagining a home, then asks the reader to adjust the image of that home to make it large and richly constructed. In the second sentence, the reader is able to immediately understand the kind of home that the writing is talking about through the use of the more specific noun “palace.”

Sometimes the meaning of an adjective is already implicit in the noun it is modifying. Consider the following example:

The royal prince Paris stayed behind the city walls and pierced his enemies with his sharp arrows.

A prince is necessarily royal, and arrows would have to be sharp to pierce a person. You could eliminate these adjectives and the meaning of the sentence would stay the same.

Revise the sentences below for overuse of adjectives (you might want to replace some of the adjective/noun combinations with more precise nouns from our vocabulary lists):

1. Some of the unfortunate crew were sucked into the enormous, terrifying mouth of Charybdis, a whirlpool monster.
2. Some readers find Odysseus to be a heroic man, but others believe he is a dishonest charlatan.
3. Circe’s palace seemed like a safe haven for the exhausted sailors.
4. The Underworld of Hades is full of tortured spirits begging for a sip of blood.
5. Telemachus had some feelings of hesitation and uncertainty about going on a journey in search of news of his father.

3.2.8 Adjectives and Bias

Skilled and sensitive writers are conscious of how their use of adjectives could shape ideas about gender, race, and other categories of identity. Keep the following guidelines in mind to avoid reinforcing stereotypes:

1. **Don’t include an adjective about somebody’s category of identity unless it is somehow relevant to your point.** Think about the sentences below:

- Greg, a male nurse, can perform CPR.

Greg’s gender has no bearing on the point of the sentence. Furthermore, including the adjective “male” implies that it is exceptional or strange for a man to be a nurse.

- My blind friend Denise loves tomatoes.

Denise's taste for tomatoes is totally unrelated to her vision; the adjective is extraneous and distracting. Most people wouldn't say "My blonde friend Denise loves tomatoes," or "My American friend Denise loves tomatoes." Sometimes people feel the impulse to use adjectives in this way to prove to others that they are accepting of diversity, but this can wind up "tokenizing" others – turning people into symbols and glossing over real problems in discrimination.

To be clear, there are plenty of times when it is appropriate and necessary to use an adjective to describe a person's identity; it would be difficult to write an essay on what Rosa Parks accomplished without mentioning the fact that she was black. The key step is to ask how including the adjective could be relevant.

2. Don't use adjectives in place of nouns.

Adjectives are intended to be used as modifiers; when you remove the noun that signifies a human, you reduce those people to a single element.

We see this problem frequently in references to people's race, ethnicity, and national origin – calling a group "illegals," or "the blacks," or "the Jews" and removing a noun that indicates *humanity* has a pejorative effect.

This issue is also apparent in the use of the adjective "female" to refer to women. "Female" can refer to any species and is not necessarily human, while the word "woman" implies a whole person. If you listen to the situations in which women are called "females," you will notice that the term is often used in a complaint or a criticism.

3. Be consistent in your use of adjectives for different groups.

Using an adjective for one group but not another can have the effect of marginalizing those people. For example:

- The Bellaire High School soccer team has a game on Friday, and the Bellaire High School girls' soccer team has a game on Saturday.
- The last time the United States won the World Cup was in 1930, but we have won the Women's World Cup in 1991, 1999, 2015, and 2019.

In both of these sentences, the implication is that it is natural for men to play soccer but that women playing soccer requires special explanation.

4. Consider the connotations of the adjectives you choose.

Some words have an implied meaning specific to one gender; "gallant," for example, is almost always used to describe men and often suggests that men have a natural obligation to put the interests of women ahead of their own. The word "shrill," which literally means high-pitched, is often used as a way to dismiss women's voices. "Uppity," which the dictionary defines as "arrogant or self-important," has a legacy of being used to marginalize black people.

Try to be conscious of how the connotations of certain words might reinforce stereotypes to avoid using those words in a hurtful way.

3.3 Review

Determine whether the underlined words in the sentences below are functioning as nouns, verbs, or adjectives.

1. Not knowing whether her son Odysseus was alive or dead anguished Anticlea.
2. Penelope crafts her shroud during the day and undoes the weaving at night.
3. Although Achilles was strong and brave, he wasn't exactly cunning.

- Odysseus's exploits resulted in the deaths of all of his soldiers.
- Circe delivers grave news when she tells Odysseus he must travel to Hades.
- The palace in Ithaca is full of intrigue – Penelope is tricking the suitors, and the suitors are plotting to kill Telemachus.
- Odysseus is keen to convince the Phaeacians that he is a hero in hopes of receiving gold and presents.
- Even though Calypso lavishes Odysseus with attention and care, he is desperate to leave her island.
- The Sirens lure sailors to their deaths with their enchanting songs.
- Although Laertes was a fierce fighter when he was young, he became mellow and peaceful in his old age.
- It is surprising that Odysseus's crew didn't mutiny after his series of terrible decisions.
- The gods punished the Greek soldiers for their plunder and destruction of the city of Troy.
- Odysseus will poise himself to attack the suitors after he reveals his true identity.
- Telemachus's rebuke of his mother for her crying is insensitive.
- The citizens of Ithaca would not accept Telemachus's reign because he is not mature enough to be king.
- The suitors scheme to catch Penelope in the act of unweaving the shroud so as to force her to choose a husband.
- The island of Scheria was shrouded in magic to prevent enemies from finding it.
- The suitors swagger into the great hall of the palace, completely unaware of the bloody fate that awaits them.
- When Agamemnon told Odysseus that he would have to leave Ithaca to fight in the Trojan War, Odysseus put a yoke on his oxen and plowed his fields with salt in an attempt to appear insane.

3.3 Adverbs

3.3.1 Definition

Adverbs are words that modify verbs, adjectives, or other adverbs.

In the sentences below, draw an arrow to the word that the underlined adverb is modifying, then decide if that word is a verb, an adjective, or another adverb (if the underlined adverb is modifying another adverb, also circle *that* word and draw an arrow to what *it's* modifying).



- Although Great Britain attempted to appease Hitler by giving him Czechoslovakia, it only encouraged him to become more aggressive.
- After Marco tripped in the hallway and spilled the entire contents of his backpack, Amelia gallantly helped him up and collected all of his papers for him.
- The fire at the hearth is very beautiful.
- The expression "to cut off one's nose to spite one's face" is a rather bloody way of explaining that some people will hurt themselves in an effort to hurt others.
- Ulysia wanted to seem cool to her classmates, but her falling down the stairs was not exactly suave.
- The tide will often ebb before a tsunami, so if you are at the beach and the water mysteriously pulls away from the shore, you might want to run.
- Joseph asked his parents if he could stay out past midnight, but it was futile because they never allowed him to miss curfew.
- Even though fifty years have passed, my memory of that day still lingers.
- The kraken used its tentacles to pull the ship towards its gnashing maw, and it seemed that death was almost certain.
- Celebrities' renown sometimes makes it difficult for them to go out in public undisturbed.

3.3.2 Kinds of Adverbs

kind of adverb	function	examples
adverbs of manner	describe how something is done	angrily, quickly, skillfully (often words that end in “-ly”)
adverbs of time	describe when something is done	afterwards, already, always, early, finally, immediately, now, recently, soon, still, then, today, tomorrow, yesterday, yet
adverbs of place	describe where something is done	above, below, here, outside, there, under
adverbs of degree	describe to what extent or how much something is done	a (little) bit, a lot, absolutely, almost, completely, enough, entirely, extremely, fairly, highly, nearly, perfectly, pretty, quite, rather, really, slightly, so, somewhat, too, totally, utterly, very
adverbs of frequency	describe how often something is done	again, almost, always, ever, frequently, generally, hardly, never, occasionally, often, rarely, seldom, sometimes, twice, usually
adverbs of purpose	describe why something is done	as, as a result, because, consequently, hence, so that, therefore, thus

Read the sentences below and decide what kind of adverb each underlined word is, then draw an arrow to the word that the adverb is modifying.

1. Odysseus revealed his true identity after he won the archery contest.
2. The suitors were completely surprised that the King of Ithaca had returned; they never expected to see him again.
3. He swiftly unleashed his arrows upon the unfortunate young men.
4. The suitors could not escape because the doors were locked.

4.3.3 Relative Adverbs

4.3.4 Adjectives in Place of Adverbs Error

A common type of grammatical error is using an adjective in place of an adverb. We often see this issue in the use of the words “good” and “well.” If someone asks you how you are doing, and you say, “I’m doing good,” the word “good” is *the thing* you are doing, not *how* you are doing.



Correct this kind of error in the sentences below:

1. The mouse scurried quick to escape the cat.
2. Turmoil erupted sudden when the thunderstorm caused the lights to go out in the classroom.

3. Reginald squandered all of the money that his parents spent on his tuition when he dropped out of school irresponsible.

4.3.5 Overuse of Adverbs Error

Just as with adjectives, adverbs should only be used when 1) the meaning of the adverb is not already implicit in the meaning of the word that it's modifying and 2) there is not a more specific verb, adjective, or adverb that could be used.



Revise the sentences below for this kind of error. Remember that you might need to get rid of an unnecessary adverb or replace an adverb/verb, adverb/adjective, or adverb/adverb combination with a more specific word.

1. I ambled slowly on my walk with my dog because he is so old.
2. The study of Egyptology really interested Rose, and she hoped to one day see a mummy.
3. The wound on her leg greatly anguished the soldier.
4. It is completely futile to try to recover your files from the hard drive if your computer has caught on fire.
5. Spitting bones on the floor is very uncivilized behavior.

