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Adjective or Adverb?

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Basic Rules

1. Adjectives modify nouns; adverbs modify verbs, adjectives, and other adverbs.

You can recognize adverbs easily because many of them are formed by adding *-ly* to an adjective.

Here are some sentences that demonstrate some of the differences between an adjective and an adverb by showing what is being modified in each sentence. In each sentence, light blue arrows point to adjectives and green arrows point to adverbs.

 Richard is <i>careless</i> .	Here <i>careless</i> is an adjective that modifies the proper noun <i>Richard</i> .
 Richard talks <i>carelessly</i> .	Here <i>carelessly</i> is an adverb that modifies the verb <i>talks</i> .

 Priya was <i>extremely</i> happy.	Here <i>happy</i> is an adjective that modifies the proper noun <i>Priya</i> and <i>extremely</i> is an adverb that modifies the adjective <i>happy</i> .
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 <p>Brendan finished his work <i>unusually quickly</i>.</p>	<p>Here <i>quickly</i> is an adverb that modifies the verb <i>finished</i> and <i>unusually</i> is an adverb that modifies the adverb <i>quickly</i>.</p>
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Adverbs can't modify nouns, as you can see from the following incorrect sentences.

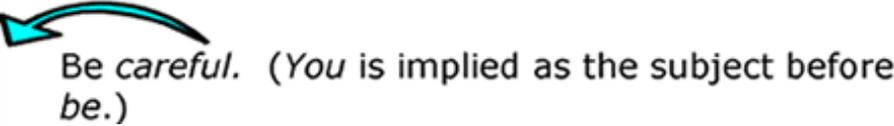
<p>He is a <i>quietly</i> man.</p>	<p>The correct sentence should say <i>He is a quiet man.</i></p>
<p>I have a <i>happily</i> dog.</p>	<p>The correct sentence should say <i>I have a happy dog.</i></p>

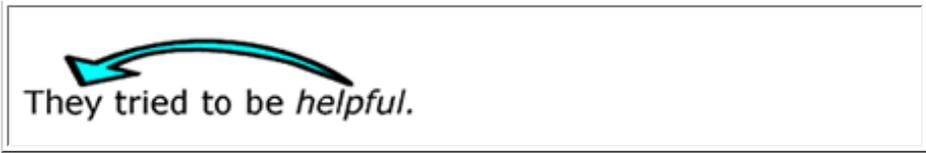
On the other hand, it's sometimes easy to make the mistake of using an adjective to modify a verb, as the incorrect sentences below show.

<p>He talks <i>careless</i> about your wife.</p>	<p>The correct sentence should say <i>He talks carelessly about your wife.</i></p>
<p>He is breathing <i>normal</i> again.</p>	<p>The correct sentence should say <i>He is breathing normally again.</i></p>

2. An adjective always follows a form of the verb *to be* when it modifies the noun before the verb.

Here are some examples that show this rule. Light blue arrows point from the adjective to the noun that it modifies.

 <p>I was <i>nervous</i>.</p>
 <p>She has been <i>sick</i> all week.</p>
 <p>Be <i>careful</i>. (You is implied as the subject before <i>be</i>.)</p>



3. Likewise, an adjective always follows a sense verb or a verb of appearance -- *feel, taste, smell, sound, look, appear, and seem* -- when it modifies the noun before the verb.

Here are some examples that show this rule. Light blue arrows point from the adjective to the noun it modifies.

	<p>Here <i>bad</i> is an adjective that modifies the noun <i>cough</i>. Using the adverb <i>badly</i> here would not make sense, because it would mean her cough isn't very good at sounding.</p>
	<p>Here <i>awful</i> is an adjective that modifies the noun <i>oil</i>. Using the adverb <i>awfully</i> here would not make sense, because it would mean that castor oil isn't very good at tasting.</p>
	<p>Here <i>fresh</i> is an adjective that modifies the noun <i>air</i>. Using the adverb <i>freshly</i> here would not make sense, because it would mean that the air has a sense of smell that it uses in a fresh manner.</p>
	<p>Here <i>unhappy</i> is an adjective that modifies the pronoun <i>she</i>. Using the adverb <i>unhappily</i> here would not make sense, because it would mean that she isn't very good at seeming.</p>
	<p>Here <i>dark</i> is an adjective that modifies the noun <i>images</i>. Using the adverb <i>darkly</i> here would not make sense, because it would mean that the images were suddenly popping into view in a dark manner.</p>

Be careful to notice whether the word modifies the subject or the verb in the sentence. If the word modifies the subject, you should use an adjective. If the word modifies the verb, you should use an adverb. The difference is shown in the following pair of sentences.

 <p>This apple smells <i>sweet</i>.</p>	<p>Here <i>sweet</i> is an adjective that modifies the noun <i>apple</i>. Using the adverb <i>sweetly</i> here would not make sense, because it would mean that the apple can smell things in a sweet manner.</p>
 <p>Your dog smells <i>carefully</i>.</p>	<p>Here <i>carefully</i> is an adverb that modifies the verb <i>smells</i>. Using the adjective <i>careful</i> here would not make sense, because it would mean that the dog gives off an odor of carefulness.</p>

Avoiding Common Errors

Bad or Badly?

When you want to describe how you feel, you should use an adjective (Why? Feel is a sense verb; see rule #3 above). So you'd say, "I feel *bad*." Saying *you feel badly* would be like saying *you play football badly*. It would mean that you are unable to feel, as though your hands were partially numb.

Good or Well?

Good is an adjective, so you do not *do good* or *live good*, but you *do well* and *live well*. Remember, though, that an adjective follows sense-verbs and be-verbs, so you also *feel good*, *look good*, *smell good*, *are good*, *have been good*, etc. (Refer to rule #3 above for more information about sense verbs and verbs of appearance.)

Confusion can occur because *well* can function either as an adverb or an adjective. When *well* is used as an adjective, it means "not sick" or "in good health." For this specific sense of *well*, it's OK to say you *feel well* or *are well* -- for example, after recovering from an illness. When not used in this health-related sense, however, *well* functions as an adverb; for example, "I did *well* on my exam."

Double-negatives

Scarcely and *hardly* are already negative adverbs. To add another negative term is redundant, because in English only one negative is ever used at a time

They found *scarcely any* animals on the island. (not *scarcely no...*)
Hardly anyone came to the party. (not *hardly no one...*)

Sure or Surely?

Sure is an adjective, and *surely* is an adverb. *Sure* is also used in the idiomatic expression *sure to be*. *Surely* can be used as a sentence-adverb. Here are some examples that show different uses of sure and surely. Light blue arrows indicate adjectives and green arrows indicate adverbs.

 <p>I am <i>sure</i> that you were there.</p>	<p>Here <i>sure</i> is an adjective that modifies the pronoun <i>I</i>.</p>
 <p>He is <i>surely</i> ready to take on this project.</p>	<p>Here <i>surely</i> is an adverb that modifies the adjective <i>ready</i>.</p>
 <p>She is <i>sure to be</i> a great leader.</p>	<p>Here <i>sure to be</i> is an idiomatic phrase that functions as an adjective that modifies the pronoun <i>she</i>.</p>
 <p><i>Surely</i>, environmental devastation has been one of the worst catastrophes brought about by industrial production.</p>	<p>Here <i>surely</i> is an adverb that modifies the verb <i>has been</i>.</p>

Real or Really?

Real is an adjective, and *really* is an adverb. Here are some examples that demonstrate the difference between *real* and *really*. Light blue arrows indicate adjectives and green arrows indicate adverbs.

 <p>She did <i>really</i> well on that test.</p>	<p>Here <i>really</i> is an adverb that modifies the adverb <i>well</i>.</p>
 <p>Is she <i>really</i> going out with him?</p>	<p>Here <i>really</i> is an adverb that modifies the verb phrase <i>going out</i>.</p>
 <p>Popular culture proposes imaginary solutions to <i>real</i> problems.</p>	<p>Here <i>real</i> is an adjective that modifies the noun <i>problems</i>.</p>

Near or Nearly?

Near can function as a verb, adverb, adjective, or preposition. *Nearly* is used as an adverb to mean "in a close manner" or "almost but not quite." Here are some examples that demonstrate the differences between various uses of *near* and *nearly*. Light blue arrows indicate adjectives and green arrows indicate adverbs. Subjects and verbs are marked in purple.

<p>subject verb The moment of truth <i>neared</i>.</p>	<p>Here <i>neared</i> is a verb in the past tense.</p>
<p>We are <i>nearly</i> finished with this project.</p>	<p>Here <i>nearly</i> is an adverb that modifies the verb <i>finished</i>.</p>
<p>I'll be seeing you in the <i>near</i> future.</p>	<p>Here <i>near</i> is an adjective that modifies the noun <i>future</i>.</p>
<p>The cat crept <i>near</i>.</p>	<p>Here <i>near</i> is an adverb of place that modifies the verb <i>crept</i>.</p>
<p>First cousins are more <i>nearly</i> related than second cousins.</p>	<p>Here <i>nearly</i> is an adverb that modifies the verb <i>related</i>.</p>
<p>The detective solves the mystery in a scene <i>near</i> the end of the movie.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"> preposition prepositional phrase </p>	<p>Here <i>near</i> is a preposition. The prepositional phase <i>near the end of the movie</i> modifies the noun <i>scene</i>.</p>

After reviewing this handout, try the following interactive exercises and check your answers online.

[Adjective/Adverb Exercise #1](#)

[Adjective/Adverb Exercise #2](#)

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