

Adjectives and Adverbs

Adjectives

We use adjectives to describe nouns and pronouns. Adjectives can come before nouns or after linking verbs.

Before the noun:

- He dropped the hot plate.
- I have a black cat.
- The small boy ran down the street.
- What a beautiful view!

After a linking verb:

- He seems tired.
- The view is beautiful.
- The weather became cold.
- My cat is black.

(Linking verbs are verbs like 'be', 'become' and 'seem' which are not actions but instead link the subject to an adjective, noun or phrase that gives us more information about the subject.)

We make the comparative and superlative of adjectives by adding either '-er / -est' or using 'more / most'.

- She is tall.
- She is taller than her sister.
- She is the tallest person in the class.

Adverbs

Adverbs are used to describe verbs, adjectives or other adverbs. They are often (but not always) made by adding 'ly' to the adjective.

- I walked slowly ('slowly' tells us about the verb 'walk').
- They worked quickly.

We make the comparative and superlative forms of adverbs by using 'more / most'.

- She sang loudly.
- She sang more loudly than her friend.
- She sang most loudly in the class.

Adverb or adjective?

It's important to remember to use an adjective after a linking verb. However, this can be tricky as some verbs can be used as both normal verbs and as linking verbs. One test is to replace the verb with the same form of 'be' and see if the sentence still makes sense. If it does, the verb is being used as a linking verb and so needs an adjective, not an adverb.

- He smells the hot soup carefully. (Here we are talking about the action of smelling and using smell as a normal verb, so we need an adverb.)
- The soup smells good. (Here we are using 'smell' as a linking verb, to describe the soup. We can replace 'smells' with 'is' and the sentence still makes sense. So, we need an adjective.)
- He looked tiredly at the dirty kitchen. (Here we are talking about the action of looking and using 'look' as a normal verb, so we use an adverb to describe the way of looking.)
- You look beautiful. (Here we are using 'look' as a linking verb, to give more information about the person. We can replace 'look' with 'are' and the sentence still makes sense. So we need an adjective.)

Irregular forms

Normally, we make an adverb by adding 'ly' to an adjective.

careful (adjective) He is always careful.	carefully (adverb) She put the glasses down carefully.
quiet (adjective) This is a quiet room.	quietly (adverb) She spoke quietly.
bad (adjective) This coffee is bad!	badly (adverb) He sings badly!

If the adjective ends in 'y', we change 'y' to 'i' and add 'ly'. If the adjective ends in 'le', we drop 'e' and add 'y'.

happy (adjective) She looks very happy.	happily (adverb) He sang happily.
gentle (adjective) It's a gentle cat.	gently (adverb) He stroked the cat gently.

However, there are some exceptions.

fast (adjective) That's a fast car.	fast (adverb) She walks fast.
early (adjective) She was early for the meeting.	early (adverb) He arrived early.
good (adjective) That is a good book.	well (adverb) She did well on the exam. ('Well' can also be an adjective. See below)
hard (adjective) Maths is hard!	hard (adverb) She tried hard. ('Hardly' is also an adverb, but means 'almost none'. See below)
late (adjective) He is always late!	late (adverb) He got up late this morning. ('Lately' is also an adverb but means 'recently'. See below.)

There are also some adjectives that end in 'ly' and don't have an adverb form. Instead we use 'in a --- way'. These are friendly, lovely, lonely, lively, and silly.

- He talked to me in a friendly way.

Good / well

'Well' can be confusing because it is both the adverb form of 'good', and an adjective that means 'healthy and fine'.

- My mother is well ('well' is an adjective that means 'healthy and fine').
- He did the work well ('well' is an adverb meaning 'in a good way').

Of course, we also use 'good' as an adjective.

- This meal is good!
- He can speak good German.

Hard / hardly

'Hard' is both an adjective and an adverb.

- The table is hard (= adjective, meaning 'not soft' or 'difficult').
- She works hard (= adverb, meaning 'with a lot of effort').

'Hardly' is also an adverb, but it means 'almost nothing' or 'almost none'.

- She hardly works (= she does almost no work).
- I have hardly any money (= I have almost no money).

Late / lately

'Late' is an adjective and an adverb. There is also an adverb 'lately', which means 'recently'.

- I'm late (= adjective, meaning 'not on time').
- He came late (= adverb, meaning 'not on time').
- I've been working a lot lately (= an adverb meaning 'recently').

Modern English and Adverbs

Many native English speakers are starting to use adjectives where traditionally we need an adverb. Some people think this is incorrect, but it's very common.

- He ran quick (instead of 'he ran quickly').

This is especially common with comparatives and superlatives.

- She ran quicker (instead of 'she ran more quickly').

Of course, it's your choice if you'd like to follow traditional grammar or use the more modern style. I'd suggest that if you're writing formally, it's probably better to use an adverb. In all my exercises here, I use the traditional style.