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The Difference between Adjectives and Adverbs

Summary:

This worksheet discusses the differences between adjectives and adverbs. It defines adjectives and adverbs, shows what each can do, and offers several examples of each in use. Click [here](#) for some examples.

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The Basic Rules: Adjectives

Adjectives modify nouns. By modifying, adjectives give a more detailed sense of the noun. For example:

- "I ate a meal." *Meal* is a noun. The reader does not know what kind of meal this is, leaving a lot of room open for interpretation.
- "I ate an enormous meal." *Meal* is a noun, and *enormous* is an adjective that modifies it. It tells us **what kind of** meal the person ate. By using adjectives, the writer gives the reader a better understanding of the noun.

Adjectives clarify the noun by answering one of the following different questions: "What kind?" or "Which?" or "How many?" For example:

- "The *tall* girl is riding her bike." *Tall* tells the reader **which** girl the writer is talking about.
- "Our *old* van needs to be replaced soon." *Old* tells the reader **what kind of** van the writer is describing.
- "The *tough* professor gave us the *final* exam." *Tough* tells the reader **what kind of** professor the writer is talking about. *Final* tells us **which** exam.
- "*Fifteen* students passed the midterm exam; *twelve* students passed the final exam." *Fifteen* and *twelve* both tell the reader **how many** students; *midterm* and *final* both tell the reader **which** exam.

Adjectives can't modify verbs, adjectives, and adverbs.

- The sentence, She ate her lunch quick, does not make sense.
- The correct sentence should say, She ate her lunch quickly, because the adverb *quickly* modifies the verb, ate. **How** did she eat? *Quickly*.

- She ate the quick lunch. In this case, *quick* modifies the noun, *lunch*. **What kind of** lunch was it? A *quick* lunch.

So, generally speaking, adjectives answer the following questions:

- **Which?**
- **What kind of?**
- **How many?**

Some Other Rules for Adjectives

Most of the time, adjectives come before nouns. However, some adjectives actually come after the nouns they modify. An adjective follows a sense verb or verb of appearance when it modifies the noun before the verb. These adjectives will most often follow a verb form of the following:

- be
- feel
- taste
- smell
- sound
- look
- appear
- seem

Some examples:

- "Brian seems sad." *Sad* describes the noun, *Brian*, not the verb, *seems*. *Sad* answers the question: **which** way does Brian seem?
- "The milk smells rotten." **What kind of** smell does the milk have? A rotten one.
- "The speaker sounds hoarse." *Hoarse* answers the question: **which** way does the sound speaker?
- "The ice-cream looks melted." Here, *melted* does not describe the verb, *looks*. It describes the noun, *ice cream*. **What kind of** ice cream does it look like? Melted ice cream.
- "Alex feels sleepy." **What kind of** way does Alex feel? Sleepy.

Likewise, an adjective always follows a form of the verb, "to be." Here are some examples of "to be" verbs: *am*, *is*, *are*, *was*, *were*, *be*, *being*, *been*.

- "The dog is black." *Black* is an adjective that modifies the noun *dog*, but it comes after the verb, *is*. **What kind of** dog is it? A black dog.
- "I was nervous." *Nervous* modifies the noun, *I*. **Which** way was I feeling? *Nervous*.
- "She has been sick all week." Here, *sick* modifies the noun, *She*. **Which** way has she been feeling all week? She's been *sick*.

- “They tried to be helpful.” In this case, *helpful* modifies the noun, they, not the verb, *tried*. **What kind of** people are they? *Helpful* people.

The Basic Rules: Adverbs

Adverbs modify verbs, adjectives, and other adverbs. (You can recognize adverbs easily because many of them are formed by adding -ly to an adjective, though that is not always the case.) The most common question that adverbs answer is **how**.

Let's look at verbs first.

- "She sang *beautifully*." *Beautifully* is an adverb that modifies *sang*. It tells us **how** she sang.
- "The cellist played *carelessly*." *Carelessly* is an adverb that modifies *played*. It tells us **how** the cellist played.

Adverbs also modify adjectives and other adverbs.

- "That woman is *extremely* nice." *Nice* is an adjective that modifies the noun *woman*. *Extremely* is an adverb that modifies *nice*; it tells us **how** nice she is. **How** nice is she? She's extremely nice.
- "It was a *terribly* hot afternoon." *Hot* is an adjective that modifies the noun *afternoon*. *Terribly* is an adverb that modifies the adjective *hot*. **How** hot is it? Terribly hot.

Adverbs answer the question **how**. They can also answer the questions **when**, **where**, and **why**.

- “She arrived late.” *Late* describes **when** she arrived.
- “They all went there for the party.” *There* is **where** they all went to the party.
- “The swim team practices every morning to develop good habits.” *To develop good habits* acts as an adverbial infinitive phrase that explains **why** the swim team practices every morning. Answering the question **why** usually requires an infinitive phrase.

Adverbs can't modify nouns, as you can see from the following incorrect sentences.

- The sentence, “He is a quietly man,” does not make sense.
- The correct sentence should be written as “He is a quiet man” because *quiet* modifies the noun, *man*, not the verb *is*. **What kind of** man is he? A *quiet* man.
- The sentence, “I have a happily dog,” does not make sense.
- The correct sentence should say, “I have a happy dog” because *happy* modifies the noun, *dog*, instead of the verb *have*. **What kind of** dog is it? A *happy* one.

In general, adverbs answer the following questions:

- **How?**
- **When?**
- **Where?**

- **Why?**

Examples of Differences between Adjectives and Adverbs

The following examples explain the differences between adjectives and adverbs:

- “Sharon's cough sounds bad.” In this case, *bad* is an adjective that modifies the noun, *cough*.
- If you wrote “Sharon’s cough sounds badly,” it would not make sense because *badly* would be an adverb modifying the verb, *sounds*, meaning that her cough isn't very good at sounding.
- “She seems unhappy today.” Here, *unhappy* is an adjective that modifies the pronoun, *she*.
- If you wrote “She seems unhappily today,” *unhappily* would not make sense, because it would mean that the verb, *seems*, is unhappy when you want to say that the noun, *she*, is unhappy.
- “Your dog smells carefully.” Here, *carefully* is an adverb that modifies the verb, *smells*.
- The sentence, “Your dog smells careful,” would not make sense because it would mean that the dog gives off an odor of carefulness.

Be sure to note the differences between the following examples:

“The dog smells clean.” Here, *clean* describes the dog itself. It's not that he smells something clean; rather, he's had a bath and does not stink. *Clean* describes **what kind of** smell comes from the dog making it an **adjective**.

“The dog smells carefully.” Here, *carefully* describes **how** the dog smells, making it an **adverb**. We imagine the dog sniffing cautiously.

Or:

“Kai dressed for the quick recital.” Here, *quick* describes the noun, *recital*, making it an **adjective**. **What kind of** recital? A quick one.

“Kai dressed quickly for the recital.” *Quickly* describes the way Kai dressed, making it an **adverb** because it modifies the verb, *dressed*. **How** did Kai dress? Quickly.

Or:

“Look at the nice bed.” *Nice* modifies the noun, *bed*, in this sentence, making it an **adjective**.

“Look at the nicely made bed.” *Nicely* modifies the adjective, *made*, in this sentence, making it an **adverb**.

Or:

“Richard is careless.” Here, *careless* is an adjective that modifies the proper noun, *Richard*. **What kind of** person is Richard? A *careless* one.

“Richard talks carelessly.” Here, *carelessly* is an adverb that modifies the verb, *talks*. **How** does Richard talk? *Carelessly*.

In general, when a word has the ending “-ly,” it will act as an adverb. Pay close attention to how the noun is modified, as this is the final criteria when deciding between an adjective and adverb.

