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. To modify means to change in some way. For example:

•"I ate a meal." Meal is a noun. We don't know what kind of meal; all we know is that someone ate a meal.

•"I ate an enormous lunch." Lunch is a noun, and enormous is an adjective that modifies it. It tells us what kind of meal the person ate.

Adjectives usually answer one of a few different questions: "What kind?" or "Which?" or "How many?" For example:

•"The tall girl is riding a new bike." Tall tells us which girl we're talking about. New tells us what kind of bike we're talking about.

•"The tough professor gave us the final exam." Tough tells us what kind of professor we're talking about. Final tells us which exam we're talking about.

•"Fifteen students passed the midterm exam; twelve students passed the final exam." Fifteen and twelve both tell us how many students; midterm and final both tell us which exam.

So, generally speaking, adjectives answer the following questions:

•Which?

•What kind of?

•How many?

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.

So, generally speaking, adverbs answer the question how. (They can also answer the questions when, where, and why.)

Some other rules:

Most of the time, adjectives come before nouns. However, they come after the nouns they modify, most often when the verb is a form of the following:

•be

•feel

•taste

•smell

•sound

•look

•appear

•seem

Some examples:

•"The dog is black." Black is an adjective that modifies the noun dog, but it comes after the verb. (Remember that "is" is a form of the verb "be.")

•"Brian seems sad." Sad is an adjective that modifies the noun Brian.

•"The milk smells rotten." Rotten is an adjective that modifies the noun milk.

•"The speaker sounds hoarse." Hoarse is an adjective that modifies the noun speaker.

Be sure to understand the differences between the following two examples:

"The dog smells carefully." Here, carefully describes how the dog is smelling. We imagine him sniffing very cautiously.

But:

"The dog smells clean." Here, clean describes the dog itself. It's not that he's smelling clean things or something; it's that he's had a bath and does not stink.