**Identifying Adjectives And Adverbs**

Adjectives modify nouns and pronouns, and that is absolutely all they do. Adverbs, though, are more versatile. Primarily, they modify verbs, but they also modify adjectives and other adverbs. In this sentence you will see the adverb in all three of its functions:

Our very kind friend will very likely agree to babysit.

The first "very" modifies the adjective "kind" (which modifies the noun "friend"). The second "very" modifies another adverb, "likely," which itself modifies the verb "will agree." So you see, the adverb is a versatile part of speech. In the following construction, it even modifies the entire sentence:

Suddenly, he was afraid.

The easiest way to identify an adjective is by position. It has three possible locations:

- immediately before a noun or pronoun
- immediately after a noun or pronoun
- following a linking verb

Since there is no way to identify an adjective by its spelling, and because there may be two or more nouns in a sentence, it is crucial that adjectives be quite near the words they modify. Adverbs, on the other hand, move about freely. They're mobile because 1) a sentence usually has only one verb, whereas it may have several nouns or pronouns, and 2) most adverbs take an "ly" ending, so their spelling helps identify them:

different (adjective); differently (adverb) confident (adjective); confidently (adverb) beautiful (adjective); beautifully (adverb)

And now we come to the difficult part. Like all rules, the rules of grammar have many exceptions. When we're talking about adjectives and adverbs, these exceptions fall into four groups (It would, of course, be impossible for you to memorize these lists. Your dictionary is the best resource whenever you're unsure about which form to use.):

**Group 1: Adverbs that never take the "ly" ending**

very, well, however, down, ahead, thus, then, quite, not, rather, over, up

We'd like to draw your attention to two troublesome words in this group. The first is "well," which has nothing to do with the adjective of the same spelling that means "good health." It refers, rather, to how something is done, as in "doing a job well." Second is "thus." (Note that this word has no "ly" ending and it is incorrect to give it one; "thusly" is not a word.)
Group 2: Adverbs that may or may not take the "ly" ending

short/shortly; wide/widely; quick/quickly; slow/slowly; smooth/smoothly; rough/roughly; strong/strongly; weak/weakly

Here are some examples involving both forms of these adverbs:

You must stop short of the yellow line. (modifies the verb "stop")
Mr. Abernathy will be with you shortly. (modifies the verb "will be")

Drive slow! (modifies the verb "drive")
Bill turned slowly toward the door. (modifies the verb "turned")

Of course, these words may also serve as adjectives (without the "ly" ending), but here we are referring only to the adverb forms. In the first pair of sentences above, "short" and "shortly" have different meanings; you must select the appropriate word for the meaning you intend. In the second pair of sentences, "slow" and "slowly" mean the same thing. As adverbs, "slow" and "quick" in the best writing always appear as "slowly" and "quickly," EXCEPT IN THE IMPERATIVE MOOD: "Come quick!" or "Drive slow!"

Group 3: Words without the "ly" ending that are both adjectives and adverbs

far, better, early, fast, much, more, late, little, near, right, straight, tall, long, big, small

Note some examples:

You are in better condition, so you had better run the marathon.
This is a fast horse. Run fast, or you will miss your bus.

In each of these examples, the word is used first as an adjective and second as an adverb. Also, note that "fast," (when referring to speed) like "thus," never takes an "ly" ending, even though "slow" does.

Group 4: Words that take the "ly" ending that are both adjectives and adverbs

kindly, friendly, sickly, leisurely, only, poorly, cowardly

Here are some examples:

Jane is a friendly person, and she always acts friendly.
We had a leisurely conversation as we walked leisurely down the path.
He was the only person in the room, so he spoke only to himself.

Of these, "only" deserves a bit more attention, because its placement in a sentence can not only change the part of speech it is, it can dramatically change the meaning of the sentence as well:
Only I wish to marry Betty. (adjective modifying "I"--I am the only one who wants to marry Betty)

I only wish to marry Betty. (adverb modifying "wish"--I don't expect to marry Betty, I only wish I could; or marrying Betty is the only wish I have)

I wish only to marry Betty. (adverb modifying "to marry"--I don't wish to do anything else to Betty, only to marry her; or--again--marrying Betty is the only wish I have)

I wish to marry only Betty. (adjective modifying "Betty"--Betty is the only person I want to marry)

Some Confusing Forms
Before we start a practical application of the things we have been studying, let's look at a list of adjectives and the adverb equivalents that are often confused with them:

- good (adjective); well (adverb)
- poor (adjective); poorly (adverb)
- some (adjective); somewhat (adverb)
- sure (adjective); surely (adverb)

Here are some examples to show where people generally get into trouble:

Wrong: He did the job good.
Right: He did the job well.

Wrong: After I ate some candy, I felt some better.
Right: After I ate some candy, I felt somewhat better.

Wrong: He said it was a sure thing, so I was sure mad when I lost.
Right: He said it was a sure thing, so I was surely mad when I lost.

Wrong: His performance was poor because he acted poor. Right: His performance was poor because he acted poorly.

Verbs that Influence Adjectives and Adverbs
Much of the confusion over adverbs and adjectives is caused by the intransitive verb. Let's examine three verbs that have both transitive and intransitive forms. Think of them as twins: sit-set, lie-lay, rise-raise.

With a little practice, you can easily distinguish between the twins in each set. You can do this for two reasons:

1. Each twin is either transitive or intransitive, never both
2. Each twin has a different spelling, which makes it all the more conspicuously different. This difference is further emphasized by the perfect tenses:

lie (present tense); have lain (perfect tense)
lay (present tense); have laid (perfect tense)

rise (present tense); have risen (perfect tense)
raise (present tense); have raised (perfect tense)
sit (present tense); have sat (perfect tense)
set (present tense); have set (perfect tense)

When you compare the sets of twins, no two words in each are spelled alike, are they? Also note that each word, except "set," changes its spelling in the perfect tense. So we have help from grammar and from spelling as we strive for correct use of these verbs.

Over the centuries, these verbs--probably because they were used so often--split, as the egg cell does to make identical twins, forming two from one, the transitive and the intransitive.

It would be wonderful if this "cell division" had taken place in all verbs that have both transitive and intransitive functions; but, alas, such is not the case:

He failed. (intransitive)
He failed the test. (transitive)

Here we see no difference in spelling, though we can tell at once that the verb functions differently in each sentence. In the first the verb doesn't go anywhere; it's like an insulator, turning the "juice" back upon the subject. The "insulator" use is the intransitive verb. In the second sentence, though, the verb serves as a conductor, transferring action from the subject to the object. This "conductor" is the transitive verb.

Of course, adjectives and adverbs can occur in any sentence, no matter what kind of verb is used; but deciding which to use is more difficult when you are using intransitive verbs. The decision is even more difficult when using the special kind of intransitive verb called the linking verb.

Modifiers with Linking Verbs
A linking verb describes the subject's condition or circumstances, and so the modifier that follows is an adjective. Linking verbs include all forms and tenses of the verb "be." They can also include verbs that relate to the physical senses (look, smell, taste, sound, feel); and other verbs that describe condition, but in less definite terms than "be" (appear, seem, become, remain, etc.).

But the problem before us is one of confusing adverbs with adjectives. If linking verbs are always followed by adjectives, where does the confusion arise? It arises because some linking verbs are also action verbs, depending on how they are used in a sentence. And when they are action verbs, they must be modified by adverbs. Thus, the writer's incorrect choice of adjective or adverb can have dramatic (and unintentional) consequences. Look at the following set of sentences:
I smell.
I smell bad.
I smell badly.

Here we have three complete and understandable sentences, providing the writer means exactly what has been written. "I smell." Yes, and so does everybody else who has a good nose or splashes on cologne or fails to bathe. The sentence is ambiguous, isn't it? The verb "smell" could refer to the act of smelling (action verb), or to the condition of the subject "I" (linking verb).

In the second sentence, "I smell bad," the writer is confessing need of a bath by selecting the adjective "bad" as the modifier. An adjective, by definition, cannot modify a verb, so it must modify the subject "I" on the other side of the intransitive (linking) verb.

The third sentence features the adverb "badly" after the verb. This, as an adverb, cannot refer to the subject at all but must modify the verb. The meaning, therefore, becomes this: The writer's nose is unable to discern odors in a normal way--presumably after an operation or as the result of an auto accident. If that's what the writer means, fine.

Let's look at a similar set.

I feel.
I feel bad.
I feel badly.

Here the first sentence gives the most general sort of news, "I feel." The second sentence has the linking verb "feel," followed by the adjective "bad" modifying (as indeed it must) the subject "I." But look at the third, in which the adverb "badly" by definition must modify the (action) verb "feel." What is meant is that the writer's sense of touch is below standard--perhaps because he's had his fingertips chopped off. When you are unhappy or regretful about something, you don't feel badly; you feel bad.

If you know you want an adjective after an intransitive verb, but you aren't sure you have one, try this little test: Change your verb to "is." If the sentence still makes sense, you indeed have an adjective:

The child looks timid. (The child is timid.)
The child looks timidly. (The child is timidly.)

The first sentence is correct because the revision makes sense. The writer has indeed chosen an adjective. Sentence two obviously does not contain the intended adjective at all because its revision is nonsense.

A Real Problem
One adjective is so often abused that it deserves special attention. This adjective is "real."
Note the following sentences:

Wrong: The minister concluded, "God bless you real good."
Wrong: The Bledsoes have a real nice house.

In the first sentence the minister has ended his sermon with two errors. First, the structure demands that what follows "you" must modify the verb "bless." The meaning of the sentence is a wish that God would do something and do it in a certain way; the action of blessing is what is intended to be modified. But the speaker doesn't use two adverbs, which he should do, but adjectives instead. The minister could have said, "May God bless you really well" or even less awkwardly, "May God really bless you."

The second sentence above has the noun "house" modified by the adjective "nice." So far, so good. But the writer now introduces a second adjective to modify the first, just as the minister did. But adjectives, of course, cannot modify other adjectives; only adverbs can. The correct expression would be "a really nice house."

**Negative Modifiers**

Negative modifiers include words like: no, not, never, hardly, barely and scarcely. They can be adjectives or adverbs:

- We have no cheese. (adjective modifying "cheese")
- She could hardly see through the fog. (adverb modifying "could . . . see")
- His hat was barely big enough to cover his head. (adverb modifying "big")

Negative modifiers can be troublesome because, if used improperly, a double negative can result. A double negative is a statement that contains two negative modifiers, the effect of which is essentially positive. It's easiest to make a mistake when a modifier that is negative by definition (like barely), is combined with a word like "not," which is commonly recognized as negative. The problem is further compounded when the adverb "not" is used as part of a contraction, because it can be easily overlooked. Look at these examples with the negative modifiers italicized:

Wrong: I don't see nothing.
Right: I don't see anything.
Right: I see nothing.

Wrong: We don't have no cheese.
Right: We don't have any cheese.
Right: We have no cheese.

Wrong: She couldn't hardly see the road.
Right: She could hardly see the road.

**Missing the Implication**
Implied, or understood, elements in sentences affect pronoun and verb forms, as well as modifier choice. Examine this sentence:

I thought we would be flying first class; but as soon as I got to the airport, I found out different.

"Different" is obviously an adjective (the adverb would be "differently"), and-as much as you may think or hear otherwise-it IS correct as used in this sentence. But where is the noun or pronoun it modifies? Well, it's not actually in the sentence, but it is understood. The entire clause, with the missing words added back in, might read ". . . I found out something different," or ". . . I found out it was different." In either case, the "something" or the "it" would refer to the situation in general.

Your ear will tell you why these words are left out of the final version of the sentence, but you must recognize that they are there by implication in order to make the correct modifier choice. If you had chosen the adverb "differently," it would, by definition, modify the verb "found (out)." This would only be appropriate in a sentence where the action of finding out is being described rather than the condition of the situation in general--a sentence such as:

John found out about the inspection from his boss, but I found out differently.

More important is the expression "more important," as in:

The flight was late and, more important, overbooked.

It has become quite common for writers and speakers alike to use the phrase "more importantly" in a sentence like this. But what would the adverb "importantly" modify? The verb "was"? The adjectives "late" or "overbooked"? The best candidate from that list would be "overbooked," but using the adverb would mean literally that the flight was overbooked in some more important way. The writer means to say that the fact the flight was overbooked is more important than the fact that it was late. And here's where we get a clue to the missing element: ". . . and, (what's) more important." That missing element contains a linking verb--"is" (in the contraction "what's")--that calls for the adjective "important," not the adverb "importantly."

It's a Matter of Degree
Sometimes you will need to express a degree of comparison between things (needing adjectives) or actions (needing adverbs). Hence you will also need special spellings to show the degree you want to express.

Let's look at some adjectives first:

good, better (comparative), best (superlative)
much, more (comparative), most (superlative)
little, less (comparative), least (superlative)
Notice that degree here is expressed by changing the spelling quite a lot, so much in fact, that the comparative and superlative forms of degree don't even resemble the adjectives on which they are based. Other adjectives, however, add only "er" and "est" or the words "more" and "most" to create comparative forms and superlative forms.

- few, fewer, fewest
- far, farther, farthest
- small, smaller, smallest
- beautiful, more beautiful, most beautiful

In these lists you see two tricky pairs of adjectives that you should pay close attention to. They are often used incorrectly:

- few/fewer/fewest--little/less/least
- far/farther/farthest-far/further/furthest

The first set involves a distinction between the degree of one thing: "little/less/least" and the number of several things: "few/fewer/fewest." Consider at the following:

- This beer has fewer calories than the other.
- This beer has less starch than the other.

"Fewer calories" compares a number of things; "less starch" compares the degree of one thing.

The second set involves real and abstract distance; that is, when you are talking about inches, feet and miles--things that can be measured with a ruler--use "far, farther, farthest." When your distance is abstract--not measurable in a physical way--use "far, further, furthest."

- I ran farther than I did yesterday.
- I am further along than Jack when it comes to math.

Another frequent error involving degree of modification is that people tend to use the superlative when they should use the comparative. The strongest term, the superlative, can be used only if more than two things are involved:

- John is the taller of my two boys.
- John is the tallest of my three boys.

Now let us look a little at degree of modification in adverbs. This is expressed by adding "more" (for comparative) and "most" (for superlative):

- sweetly, more sweetly, most sweetly
beautifully, more beautifully, most beautifully

Errors in using degree in adverbial modification involve confusing the adjective with the adverb:

Wrong: Some birds sing sweeter than others.
Right: Some birds sing more sweetly than others.

Finally, there are some terms that are absolute in meaning, and cannot, therefore, have comparative or superlative forms. Here are just a few:

dead, final, square, unique, impossible

Such expressions as "most unique," "more impossible," "more square" expressions are meaningless. Absolutes cannot be modified by degree. (Note that it's perfectly acceptable to say that something is "nearly square," or "almost impossible." But once the absolute condition is achieved, it can never become "more" or "most.")

SUMMARY

- Some verbs are either transitive or intransitive; some are both
- Some verbs that have both transitive and intransitive forms indicate the intended use by altering their spelling, but most do not
- Adverbs are usually recognized by their "ly" ending
- Some adverbs take the "ly" ending or not, depending on their meaning
- Some words that do not take the "ly" ending are both adjectives and adverbs
- Some words that do take the "ly" ending are both adjectives and adverbs
- Words after intransitive verbs that modify the subject itself are adjectives
- Adverbs after intransitive verbs must modify the verb, not the subject
- Adjectives cannot modify other adjectives
- Both adjectives and adverbs have comparative and superlative forms
- Comparative modification involves two things only
- Superlative modification involves three or more things
- Absolute terms do not take comparative or superlative modification