

CC Quick Grammar Guide: Adjectives

Definition

Adjectives modify nouns or pronouns by describing them in some way. More than one adjective can modify the same noun or pronoun.

In sentences, adjectives usually come before or directly after the noun they modify (**attributive** adjectives) but may also come after a 'being' verb to modify the noun subject (**predicative** adjectives). **Compound** or **phrasal** adjectives consist of two or more words that together modify the noun or pronoun.

In the example sentences below, the adjectives are *italicised* and the nouns they modify are in **bold**.

TYPE	DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLES
Attributive	Adjectives that come before or immediately after the noun.	My <i>old black</i> cat sleeps a lot. The body <i>corporate</i> sends out invoices every 3 months.
Predicative	Adjectives that come after the noun with a linking verb (i.e. form part of the predicate of a sentence).	My cat is <i>old</i> and <i>black</i> . She was <i>lonely</i> and <i>miserable</i> .
Compound (also called phrasal)	Two or more words that together modify the noun; usually hyphenated before the noun and not hyphenated after the noun.*	My cat has a <i>high-pitched</i> meow . My cat's meow is <i>high pitched</i> .

* Hyphenation of compound adjectives is complex, so this is a generalisation.

Degrees of comparison

Most adjectives can form degrees of comparison. These are called **positive**, **comparative** and **superlative**. Positive adjectives are simply the base word. When comparing up, one-syllable adjectives usually take the suffixes *-er* or *-est* (although there are some exceptions), while multisyllable adjectives are usually preceded by the words *more* or *most*. When comparing down, *less* and *least* are always used.

Absolute adjectives, such as *perfect*, *unique* and *infinite*, have no degrees of comparison.

POSITIVE	COMPARATIVE	SUPERLATIVE
big	bigger	biggest
warm	warmer	warmest
good	better	best
bad	worse	worst
expensive	more expensive	most expensive
likely	more likely	most likely
wild	less wild	least wild
amused	less amused	least amused



Royal order of adjectives

When two or more adjectives modify the same noun, they usually follow a certain order; this is called the royal order of adjectives. **Evaluative** adjectives – those that express an opinion or observation – come first. **Descriptive** adjectives – those that describe physical attributes like size, shape, age or colour – come next. **Definitive** adjectives – those that define the origin, material or purpose of the noun – come last, that is, directly before the noun.

TYPE OF ADJECTIVE		EXAMPLES
Evaluative	1. Observation or opinion	cute, elegant, tedious, wonderful, dreadful, brash, loving
Descriptive	2. Size/length/height	big, small, huge, tiny, wide, thin, large, tall, short, broad
	3. Shape/physical quality	round, square, triangular, oval, sharp, rough, smooth
	4. Age	old, young, ancient, modern, new, antique, mature
	5. Colour	crimson, yellow, navy, indigo, violet, turquoise, green
Definitive	6. Origin	Australian, Japanese, Arabic, Scottish, American, Moroccan
	7. Material	wooden, plastic, metal, silk, cotton, gold, concrete, glass
	8. Purpose or qualifier	walking, cooking, rocking, sports, kitchen, unlikely

Opinion	Size	Shape	Age	Colour	Origin	Material	Purpose	Noun
		knobbly		brown			walking	stick
			antique			wooden	rocking	chair
adorable	petite				Italian			teacup
		sharp				steel	kitchen	knife
flashy			new	green			sports	car

Commas with adjectives

Whether to use commas between adjectives in a string depends on whether they are from the same category or different categories. Those in the same category are called **coordinating** adjectives and should have commas or *and* in between. Those in different categories are known as **cumulative** adjectives and do not need commas or *and*. A comma should never be used after the final adjective, that is, before the noun itself.

TYPE	DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLES
Coordinating	Adjectives from the same category (e.g. two opinion adjectives or three colour adjectives); these need commas or <i>and</i> in between.	My <i>elegant, friendly</i> cat snuggles in my lap. His <i>uninformed, biased</i> views disgusted me. The <i>red, white</i> and <i>blue</i> flag hung limply.
Cumulative	Adjectives from different categories; these don't need commas or <i>and</i> in between.	My <i>large grey Persian</i> cat purrs loudly. His <i>long brown tweed</i> coat looked warm. Her <i>glamorous red silk evening</i> dress dazzled everyone in the room.

Usage tips

Although adjectives can add colour and interest to writing, beware of overuse. Choose precise adjectives to communicate your message effectively to readers. Better still, use a strong noun in place of an adjective + noun combination (e.g. *dilemma* or *quandary* instead of *difficult problem*).

