

## THE BASICS OF SPEECH 4: ADJECTIVES

Adjectives are words that qualify or limit the meaning of nouns or pronouns by adding distinct descriptions about them. In describing nouns or pronouns, adjectives are likely to answer the following questions: *What kind of...?*; *Which one of...?*; and *How many of...?* Consider the two sentences below:

Tall people experience a bit of difficulty getting through small doors.

The red Honda is the car I recently purchased.

(In the first sentence, the adjectives *Tall* and *small* describe the nouns *people* and *door* respectively: *Tall* answers the question, “What kind of people...?”; and *small* answers the question, “What kind of door...?” In the second sentence, the adjective *red* gives a distinct description about a particular Honda: *red* answers the question “Which one of the cars...?”)

Adjectives can be common or proper. **Common adjectives** are created from common nouns and are not capitalized – unless they begin a sentence. **Proper adjectives** are created from proper nouns and are capitalized. Examples of proper adjectives in use:

Libyan doctor

Renaissance era

Lutheran followers

Most adjectives come in three (comparison) forms called the *positive*, the *comparative*, and the *superlative*. The **positive form adjective** describes a noun or a pronoun without making comparisons:

Here is the wonderful art studio.

“That is one quick runner,” noted the journalist.

The **comparative form adjective** compares two nouns or pronouns. Adjectives with one or two syllables are usually made comparative by the addition of *-er*. Adjectives with two or more syllables are usually made comparative by the addition of *more* or *less*. The word *than* typically follows the comparative form:

Batman is tougher than Spider-man.

Spider-man is less courageous than Batman.

Today is a more sunny day than yesterday.

The **superlative form adjective** compares three (or more) nouns or pronouns. Adjectives with one

or two syllables are usually made superlative by the addition of *-est*. Adjectives with two or more syllables are usually made superlative with the addition of *most* or *least*. The word *the* usually precedes the superlative form:

Okonkwo is the **tallest** of the three midgets.  
 However, Okonkwo is the **least courageous** of the three midgets.  
 You were selected for being the **most careful** trainee.

Below are examples of comparison forms of adjectives:

POSITIVE	COMPARATIVE	SUPERLATIVE
Bad	Worse	Worst
Careful	More careful	Most careful
Good	Better	Best
Lucky	Luckier	Luckiest
Quick	Quicker	Quickest
Silly	Sillier	Silliest

Note that there are no degrees of comparison for adjectives that are absolute concepts: For instance, it is illogical to speak of something “more infinite”, “less round”, or “most (or very) unique.” Other adjectives that do not form comparatives or superlatives include *adequate*, *complete*, *constant*, *empty*, *impossible*, *inevitable*, and *supreme*.

It is also grammatically incorrect to double comparative or superlative forms. For instance “more prettier” or “most prettiest” is formally incorrect.

The government's new policy is their **best** (not *most best*) one so far.  
 Janelle was **happier** (not *more happier*) than I had ever seen her before.

### **Coordinate and Cumulative Adjectives**

When two or more adjectives evenly describe a noun they are called **coordinate adjectives**: These adjectives modify nouns individually. If you can put *and* or *but* between the adjectives and not change the meaning, then they are coordinate adjectives. In a sentence, coordinate adjectives are always separated by commas:

The **fat, famous, revered** police officer bought a home today.  
The **revered, famous, fat** police officer bought a home today.  
The **fat and famous but revered** police officer bought a home today.  
(In the first sentence the highlighted adjectives equally describe the noun *police officer*. Changing the positions of these coordinate adjectives does not affect the meaning, as in the second sentence. And by using *and* and *but* in the third sentence, the meaning remains intact when compared to the first two sentences.)

When two or more adjectives act together to modify a noun, they are called **cumulative adjectives**:

These adjectives build on each other, with each adjective to the left of the noun modifying the entire block to the right of it. Cumulative adjectives are not separated by commas, and cannot be logically combined with *and* or *but*:

The company's new estate has **five little brown houses**.  
The company's new estate has **brown five little** houses.  
The company's new estate has **five and little but brown** houses.  
(In the first sentence *brown* modifies *houses*, *little* modifies *brown houses*, and *many* modifies the phrase *little brown houses*. Just reading the second sentence it becomes clear that the structure is formally incoherent. With the addition of *and* and *but* there is no logic in the third sentence.)

### **Order of Cumulative Adjectives**

In a series certain types of cumulative adjectives precede other types in the same series. While there are exceptions, cumulative adjectives generally have a standard arrangement in the English language:

- a) Articles and pronouns go first: *a, an, the, his, her, our, their, few, several, every*, etc.
- b) Words about assessment are next: *interesting, beautiful, cruel, unique, ingenious, ingenuous, crafty*, etc.
- c) Words concerning size then follow: *big, small, minute, tiny, large, huge*, etc.
- d) Words regarding length and shape go next: *round, long, short, square, triangular, circular, wide*, etc.
- e) Words about age then follow: *old, young, new, ancient, fresh*, etc.
- f) Words concerning color go next: *blue, red, indigo, brown, violet, pale, crimson* etc.
- g) Words regarding nationality go next: *Cuban, Algerian, Iraqi, Nigerian, Lebanese, Venezuelan*,

etc.

- h) Religious words then follow: *Muslim, Buddhist, Taoist, Christian, Jew*, etc.
- i) Words about material make-up go next: *woolen, wooden, iron, steel, glass, concrete*, etc.
- j) Nouns used as adjectives then follow: *wine* (as in *wine cork*), *magazine* (as in *magazine cover*), *toy* (as in *toy store*), *hunting* (as in *hunting grounds*), etc.
- k) The modified noun goes last: *mother, table, school, sun, lake, chicken, car*, etc.

### **-Ing and -Ed Verbs Used as Adjectives**

Both the present participle (*-ing* form) and the past participle (*-ed* form) of verbs can be used as adjectives. For the modified word to produce an effect the *-ing* form is used; for the modified word to be affected by something the *-ed* form is applied:

PRODUCES AN EFFECT	HAS AN EFFECT PRODUCED ON IT
Amazing	Amazed
Depressing	Depressed
Interesting	Interested
Saddening	Saddened
Surprising	Surprised
Worrying	Worried

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