Adjectives

An adjective is a word that describes or modifies either a noun or pronoun. Adjectives usually come before the noun that they describe and answer questions like:

- Which?
- What kind?
- How many?

Here are a few examples of sentences with adjectives:

- Henrietta was so worried about the final exam that she couldn’t sleep.
- Bear Bryant had the reputation of being an intimidating coach.
- Three bulldozers could be heard rumbling around during construction.

In the first sentence, “final” is an adjective because it tells us which exam Henrietta is worried about. In the second sentence, “intimidating” is an adjective because it describes what kind of coach Bear Bryant was. In the third sentence, “three” is an adjective because it answers the question of how many bulldozers could be heard during construction.

Often, more than one adjective can be used in a sentence to modify a particular noun or pronoun. Here are some examples:

- The grumpy old men annoyed him most of all.
- The mayor had a penchant for supporting odd and outdated legislation.

In sentence one, “grumpy” and “old” describe which men annoyed him. In sentence two, “odd” and “outdated” tell us what kind of legislation the mayor supported.

Occasionally, an adjective will appear after the noun or pronoun that they describe. In these cases, the adjective will follow a “be” verb (such as “is” or “was”) or a verb that relates to the five senses (such as “looks” or “smells” or “feels”). Examples:

- Her car was unreliable.
- The cat looked wild and feisty.
- The leftovers in Steve’s fridge smelled disgusting.
Using Adjectives

• Present/Past Participles

Both the present and past participle forms of verbs may be used as adjectives.

Here are some examples of present participles: surprising, exciting, terrifying

Present participles always end in –ing.

Here are some examples of past participles: surprised, excited, terrified

Past participles most commonly end in –ed, but can also end in –d, -t, -en, or –n.

When used as adjectives, participles can come before the noun they modify, or they can follow both the noun and a linking verb.

It was an exciting class.

The class was exciting.

The terrified teacher ran out of the room.

The teacher was terrified and ran out of the room.

Problems most commonly occur when choosing to use either the past or present participle. To avoid such problems, we must keep two very simple ideas in mind. First, remember that a present participle can only describe a person or thing causing an experience.

INCORRECT: The roller coaster ride was excited.

CORRECT: The roller coaster ride was exciting.

Roller coaster rides do not have feelings; rather, they cause them.

A past participle can only describe a person or thing undergoing an experience. The riders of the roller coaster may cause excitement, but we want to talk about how they were made to feel.

INCORRECT: The exciting riders of the roller coaster could not stop giggling.

CORRECT: The excited roller coaster riders could not stop giggling.
• **Cumulative Adjectives**

Cumulative adjectives cannot be linked by the word and, nor can they be separated by commas. They must follow a specific order, as follows:

**FIRST**
*Evaluative Word*- beautiful, ugly, tasty, stinky

**NEXT**
*Size*- enormous, miniscule, gigantic, tiny

**NEXT**
*Length or Shape*- long, short, round, square

**NEXT**
*Age*- new, young, antique, ancient

**NEXT**
*Color*- crimson, white, gray, adobe

**NEXT**
*Nationality*- Jordanian, Argentine, Portuguese

**NEXT**
*Religion*- Buddhist, Muslim, Mormon, Jain

**NEXT**
*Material*- teak, cotton, granite, aluminum

**LAST**
*Noun/Adjective*- sports (as in sports-car)

Example:
I love driving around in my beautiful enormous antique crimson Italian steel sports-car.

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This handout is adapted from University of Alabama Writing Center Website. Only the format has been changed.