

Lesson 4.5: More on Adverbs and Other Modifiers – and Punctuation!

Adverbs can occur in a variety of positions in a sentence. This kind of movability is typical of many modifiers.

She **carefully** picked up the kitten.

She picked up the kitten **carefully**.

Carefully, she picked up the kitten.

He **often** forgets to bring his lunch.

He forgets to bring his lunch **often**.

Often, he forgets to bring his lunch.

Apparently, someone forgot to close the door.

Someone forgot to close the door, **apparently**.

Someone **apparently** forgot to close the door.

Do the different positions of the adverb in each of these examples affect the meaning? If so, how?

As mentioned in **lesson 14**, the term “adverbial” has been used by some to mean “modify.” Lots of different types of phrases can be modifiers: noun phrases, verb phrases, prepositional phrases, adjective phrases, and whole clauses can modify, providing extra, non-essential information about reason, place, cause, condition, and so on. Some examples of modifiers, of the category Adverb, but also of other categories, are given below.

Hastily, I ate the cookie. - adverb

Guilty, he walked up to the stand. - adjective

That guy looked at him **in a meaningful way**. - prepositional phrase

We won the game **yesterday**. - noun

Laughing loudly, we walked into the theater – participial verb phrase

His lips curled in a snarl, the dog backed away. – participial clause

Notice that when these occur at the beginning of the clause, they are set off by commas. In usage guides, such words and phrases are often called “introductory elements,” a vague term if I ever heard one, and to leave out the comma is considered a fairly serious error of writing. The “comma intonation” is marked by a downward intonation and sometimes a slight pause. See what your students think about these beginning-of-the-sentence modifiers and whether they all have intonational distinctions or pauses or both.

Another clue to punctuating such modifiers is, that if it is indeed a modifier and one that can be set off by a comma, it should be able to move around – to the beginning of the sentence, to the end, and sometimes, even, to the middle (like *even* in this sentence). If it’s not a modifier and is a necessary component of the sentence, it won’t move around so easily.

Note that adjectives in prenominal position – before a noun – cannot move, even though they are modifiers. In fact, there is a fairly strict order of adjectives when there is more than one. Which sounds better – *a little brown dog* or *a brown little dog*? Can you explain why? Probably not. When we have more than one adjective, there is an order to them that native speakers of English usually have intuitions about but have a hard time articulating. Generally, the adjective order in English is something like this:

1. quality, opinion, judgment, or attitude – ugly, awful, worse, lovely
2. size – huge, tiny
3. age, temperature – old, cold
4. shape – oval, square, twisted
5. color – red, orange, greenish
6. origin – Norwegian, local
7. material – woven, metallic, plastic

Activity. Pick a noun and pick a determiner (*a, the, my, your*, etc.), and then put up to seven adjectives in between them to see if they follow this order. (We almost never have that many adjectives in regular speech, so you might want to try three or four – but seven is kind of fun as an extra challenge!) Compare your lists to see if you agree on the adjective orderings.

the _____, _____, _____, _____, _____,
_____, _____, thing

There may be some adjectives that you aren't sure how to categorize. Discuss with each other to see if you can agree what kind of adjective it might be.

Modifiers allow us to add non-essential but important information to a sentence, and they also give us with a way to combine clauses and make our writing more interesting. Consider the two independent clauses below:

Bo talked quietly to his kitten. He didn't want to scare it.

Or we can use one of the movable modifiers to combine the two independent clauses into one:

Bo talked quietly to his kitten because he didn't want to scare it.

Because he didn't want to scare it, Bo talked quietly to his kitten.

Here are some other examples:

Sue tapped Lou. Lou jumped. Sue tapped Lou and Lou jumped. – combining with and

When Sue tapped Lou, Lou jumped. – combining with a clausal modifier

Movable modifiers therefore provide ways to vary clause structure and sentence style.

We can stack up several movable modifiers.

Sue tapped Lou very lightly on her way to her seat.

Sue wanted Lou to know she wasn't mad at him.

Lou knew that Sue wasn't mad.

On her way to her seat, Sue tapped Lou, very lightly, because she wanted him to know she wasn't mad at him, even though Lou probably knew that.

We see movable modifiers in written texts quite frequently, and it may well be the case that they are much more of a feature of written language than of spoken language.

Activity. Combine the following short sentences into a single longer, more complex one, which maintains essentially the same meaning.

The cat chased the rat. The rat was probably scared.

I stood on the deck. It was dusk. I saw the sunset. The sunset was beautiful.

My sister doesn't like eggs. She eats eggs anyway. They have protein.

Here's this lesson as a doc.