

Lesson 4.3: Adverbs

Adverbs are an elusive member of the phrasal categories – they’re a bit difficult to define, both in terms of their meaning and their morphology and syntax. One of the main reasons adverbs cause trouble is terminological. That is, some grammarians over the years have used the term “adverbial” to mean “any category or phrase that modifies another,” so that means prepositional phrases or non-essential nouns or infinitival clauses. This is confusing. There is evidence that adverbs have unique morphological and syntactic behavior, enough to justify a unique category, so they deserve that. And if we reserve the term “modify” for anything that is not required by another element, then both terms, *adverb* and *modify*, will be more useful. Here is just one example of the many that use the term “adverbial phrase” to mean, circularly, “playing the role of an adverb”. I do not find that this is useful. All sorts of types of phrases can serve as modifiers, so reserve the term *adverb* for just adverbs.

So if adverbs are not "adverbial phrases," what are they? Generally, adverbs modify, or give extra information about verbs, and they describe manner, time, attitude of the speaker, possibility, or serve to focus certain parts of the sentence.

The kids all ran **slowly**. (manner)

My mom runs **often**. (time)

Your friends will **hopefully** meet you at the airport. (attitude)

We will **probably** be late for school. (possibility)

They sometimes end in *-ly*, but not always. They can have no suffix, or they can have suffixes other than *-ly*, including *-wise*, *-like*, *-ward*, and *-ways*.

We are eating fast.

They ran too slow.

He wrote on the page sideways.

She walked backwards in the playground.

The baby crawled crablike across the room.

Note that some adverbs have the same form as their related adjectives, which can be a bit tricky when trying to label them. Adjectives, however, do not modify verbs; only adverbs do.

adverb: We ran hard in the race.

adjective: The hard race was almost over.

adverb: Be safe!

adjective: She is a very safe driver.

(Adjectives don’t modify verbs, but they can be complements of verbs, meaning that the adjective is not just extra information, but is needed to “complete” the meaning of the sentence: *She is tired*.)

Although the examples above with *hard* and *safe* are acceptable, other suffixless adverbs, sometimes called flat adverbs, are considered less standard in formal written English. They are usually quite standard in speech, however, and follow the natural rules of language.

We ran slow.

She walks too quick for me.

I think I did good on that test.

Merriam-Webster's video on flat adverbs is pretty good.

Activity: In a book or other text, find examples of adverbs. Do they modify the verb, giving you more information about the manner, time, or purpose? If you think you have an adverb but it doesn't modify a verb, it may modify the whole sentence. We'll look at some of these sentence adverbs in a separate post.

Like adjectives, you can indicate comparisons using adverbs with their comparative and superlative forms, either *-er/-est* or *more/less*.

(Not all adverbs that take comparative *-er* can also take superlative *-est*.)

The runner ran harder during the last mile of the race.

The runner ran fastest during the last mile of the race.

We ate dinner later than usual.

She arrived earliest of all the guests.

My friend runs more frequently than I do.

My friend most often runs in the morning.

Typically, as with adjectives, shorter, one-syllable words take *-er* and *-est* and longer, multi-syllabic words take *more* and *most*. Adverbs that end in *-ly* always take *-er* and *-est*: more slowly.

Also, as with adjectives, some adverbs have irregular comparative and superlative forms:

Our team played badly/worse/worst at the soccer game.

Our team played well /better/best at the soccer game.

Activity: Some words cannot have comparative and superlative forms. From the following list of adverbs, determine which ones cannot and see if you can come up with a reason why not. For those that can take a comparative form, write whether it is *-er* or *more*. Do the same for the superlative forms.

actually, afterwards, almost, always, annually, anxiously, boldly, bravely, briefly, busily, calmly, carefully, carelessly, cautiously, certainly, cheerfully, clearly, continually, courageously, daily, daintily, dearly, defiantly, deliberately, easily, elegantly, energetically, equally, especially, eventually, exactly, excitedly, fairly, faithfully, far, fast, fortunately, frankly, gracefully, immediately, interestingly, knowingly, nervously, often, quietly, seldom, sometimes, soon, surprisingly, suspiciously, sweetly, truthfully, unnaturally, upbeat, vaguely

(The idea is that, like with adjectives, certain adverbs are not gradable, so resist such comparisons. See the post on adjectives.)

Occasionally, adverbs can modify words other than verbs, including nouns:

Only one friend waited for me. (*only* modifies *one friend*)

And adverbs can sometimes modify adjectives, though often these will be degree words instead, which we'll learn about in the next lesson.

She is obviously tired. The cats are clearly happy.

Have fun exploring the poor misunderstood adverb. It is actually quite useful. Writers are sometimes discouraged from using adverbs, especially in fiction writing; examples of such prohibitions are here and here. And though I rarely meet an adverb that should be axed, perhaps your students do use them too abundantly, and now should at least be able to identify them.