Adverbs: Qualifying Actions, Descriptions, and Claims

An adverb is a word that describes or modifies a verb, adjective, or other adverb. Adverbs communicate where, when, why, how, how often, how much, or to what degree. They qualify the actions we narrate, the descriptions we record, and the claims we make. Adverbs are as versatile as they are mobile; they can often be moved within a sentence, within limits.

She picked up her books and ran to class hurriedly.
The old man told his story deliberately.
The test usually confirms the diagnosis.
The very old car limped down . . .

She picked up her books and hurriedly ran to class.
She picked up her books and hurriedly ran to class.
She picked up her books and ran, hurriedly, to class.

In these sentences, the adverb “hurriedly” is modifying the verb “ran.”

Hurriedly, she picked up her books and ran to class.

In this sentence, hurriedly modifies both verbs “picked up” and “ran.”

From his expression, one could tell he was irreversibly confused.

In this sentence, the adverb “irreversibly” is modifying the adjective “confused.”

After taking medicine, almost all patients experienced nausea.

In this sentence, the adverb “almost” is modifying the adjective “all” to limit the claim about the effect of the medicine.

Note that “extremely” and “much” cannot be moved without changing meaning in the sentence. These adverbs are bound to the words they modify.

Frame Sentences

Adverbs in English are most often formed from adjectives, by adding -ly: Efficient becomes efficiently. The easiest way to recognize an adverb is by its -ly ending. These are often called “-ly adverbs.”

But not all adverbs are -ly adverbs. To tell if a word not ending in -ly is an adverb, you can use the following frame sentences. Any single word that qualifies the verb, adjective, adverb to complete frame sentences like these must be an adverb.

The old man told his story ___________.
The old man told his story deliberately.
The old man told his story often.

The test ___________ confirms the diagnosis.
The test usually confirms the diagnosis.
The test always confirms the diagnosis.

The ______ old car limped down the street.
The very old car limped down . . .
Forms
Most adverbs have three forms: positive, comparative, and superlative. We use these forms to compare the degree of the action or description deliberated in a sentence.

Positive Form
The positive form is the base form of the adverb, which implies no comparison.

She ran quickly.

She ran gracefully.

Comparative Form
The comparative form is used to compare one subject to another. It most often uses the word more paired with the adverb. But some comparative adverbs retain their adjective form, the -er form of the adjective: quick becomes quicker. You can tell whether the -er form of the word is an adjective or adverb by looking at what the word modifies.

She runs quicker than her friend. (Quicker is modifying the verb here, so it is an adverb.)
Her friend is the quicker typist. (Quicker is modifying the noun here, so it is an adjective.)

She ran more gracefully than her friend. (We would not say “gracefuller.”)

If you unsure of the form an adverb takes, look it up in a dictionary. Merriam Webster’s Learner’s Dictionary online, for instance, lists the comparative forms of “badly,” which forms its comparatives irregularly.

badly /ˈbædli/ adverb
worse /ˈwɔːrs/; worst /ˈwʊst/

1: in a bad manner

- We played badly.
- The car ran badly.
- He played badly, but I played even worse.

Superlative Form
The superlative form is used to compare the subject among three or more nouns. Most often the superlative form pairs most with an -ly adverb. However, some superlative adverbs retain their superlative adjective form and end with -est.

She ran the quickest in the race.

She ran the most gracefully.
Activity 1: Analyzing Adverbs
Directions: Underline both the adverb(s) and the word(s) modified in each sentence.

1. I excitedly told her the good news.
2. The old lady chased away the squirrels angrily.
3. Jessica eloquently gave a speech that was surprisingly informative.
4. The little girl skipped gracefully as she blissfully ate an ice cream cone.
5. Jacob was seemingly guilty when he looked away nervously.
6. Because he is smarter, Anthony performed better than me on the test.

Activity 2: Composing with Adverbs
Write a paragraph of at least five sentences in which you evaluate the quality of an action performed. For instance, you might compose five sentences that talk about how effectively you performed Activity 1. Consciously work in adverbs that modify verbs, adjectives, or other adverbs. Try to include at least one comparative or superlative adverb in your evaluation.

Underline the adverbs in each of the sentences you compose. Draw an arrow from the adverb to the word it modifies.

Answer Key for Activity 1 (adverb, word modified)

1. excitedly, told
2. angrily, chased
3. eloquently, gave; surprisingly, informative
4. gracefully, skipped; blissfully, ate
5. seemingly, guilty; nervously, looked
6. better, performed

References

