San José State University Writing Center
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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**.
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, **almos**t 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** /ˈwɚs/ ; **worst** /ˈwɚst/
>
> **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

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Lunsford, Andrea. *The Everyday Writer*. 4th ed. Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2010. Print.

Merriam Webster. “Badly.” *Merriam Webster’s Learner’s Dictionary*. N.d. www.learnersdictionary.com. Web. 1 December 2014.