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Summary:

This resource provides basic guidelines of adjective and adverb use.

Adjectives with Countable and Uncountable Nouns

The Basic Rules: Adjectives

A countable noun is one that can be expressed in plural form, usually with an "s." For example, "cat--cats," "season--seasons," "student--students."

An uncountable noun is one that usually cannot be expressed in a plural form. For example, "milk," "water," "air," "money," "food." Usually, you can't say, "He had many moneys."

Most of the time, this doesn't matter with adjectives. For example, you can say, "The cat was gray" or "The air was gray." However, the difference between a countable and uncountable noun does matter with certain adjectives, such as the following:

- some/any
- much/many
- little/few
- a lot of/lots of
- a little bit of
- plenty of
- enough
- no

Some/Any:

Both "some" and "any" can modify countable and uncountable nouns.

- "There is *some* water on the floor."
- "There are *some* Mexicans here."
- "Do you have *any* food?"
- "Do you have *any* apples?"

Much/Many:

"Much" modifies only uncountable nouns.

- "They have so *much* money in the bank."
- "The horse drinks so *much* water."

"Many" modifies only countable nouns.

- "*Many* Americans travel to Europe."
- "I collected *many* sources for my paper."

Little/Few:

"Little" modifies only uncountable nouns.

- "He had *little* food in the house."
- "When I was in college, there was *little* money to spare."

"Few" modifies only countable nouns.

- "There are *a few* doctors in town."
- "He had *few* reasons for his opinion."

A lot of/lots of:

"A lot of" and "lots of" are informal substitutes for much and many. They are used with uncountable nouns when they mean "much" and with countable nouns when they mean "many."

- "They have *lots of* (much) money in the bank."
- "*A lot of* (many) Americans travel to Europe."
- "We got *lots of* (many) mosquitoes last summer."
- "We got *lots of* (much) rain last summer."

A little bit of:

"A little bit of" is informal and always precedes an uncountable noun.

- "There is *a little bit of* pepper in the soup."
- "There is *a little bit of* snow on the ground."

Plenty of:

"Plenty of" modifies both countable and uncountable nouns.

- "They have *plenty of* money in the bank."
- "There are *plenty of* millionaires in Switzerland."

Enough:

Enough modifies both countable and uncountable nouns.

- "There is enough money to buy a car."
- "I have enough books to read."

No

No modifies both countable and uncountable nouns.

- "There is *no* time to finish now."
- "There are *no* squirrels in the park."

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Adjective or Adverb?

Rule #1: Adjectives modify nouns; adverbs modify verbs, adjectives, and other adverbs.

You can recognize adverbs easily because many of them are formed by adding -ly to an adjective.

Here are some sentences that demonstrate some of the differences between an adjective and an adverb.

Richard is careless.

Here *careless* is an adjective that modifies the proper noun *Richard*.

Richard talks carelessly.

Here *carelessly* is an adverb that modifies the verb *talks*.

Priya was extremely happy.

Here *happy* is an adjective that modifies the proper noun *Priya* and *extremely* is an adverb that modifies the adjective *happy*.

Adverbs can't modify nouns, as you can see from the following incorrect sentences.

He is a quietly man.

The correct sentence above should say, "He is a quiet man."

I have a happily dog.

The correct sentence above should say, "I have a happy dog."

Rule #2: An adjective always follows a form of the verb to be when it modifies the noun before the verb. Here are some examples that show this rule.

I was nervous.
She has been sick all week.
They tried to be helpful.

Rule #3: Likewise an adjective always follows a sense verb or a verb of appearance — feel, taste, smell, sound, look, appear, and seem — when it modifies the noun before the verb.

Sharon's cough sounds bad.

Here bad is an adjective that modifies the noun cough. Using the adverb badly here would not make sense, because it would mean her cough isn't very good at sounding.

Castor oil tastes awful.

Here awful is an adjective that modifies the noun oil. Using the adverb awfully here would not make sense, because it would mean that castor oil isn't very good at tasting.

The ocean air smells fresh.

Here fresh is an adjective that modifies the noun air. Using the adverb freshly here would not make sense, because it would mean that the air has a sense of smell that it uses in a fresh manner.

She seems unhappy today.

Here unhappy is an adjective that modifies the pronoun she. Using the adverb unhappily here would not make sense, because it would mean that she isn't very good at seeming.

Be careful to notice whether the word modifies the subject or the verb in the sentence. If the word modifies the subject, you should use an adjective. If the word modifies the verb, you should use an adverb. The difference is shown in the following pair of sentences.

This apple smells sweet.

Here sweet is an adjective that modifies the noun apple. Using the adverb sweetly here would not make sense, because it would mean that the apple can smell things in a sweet manner.

Your dog smells carefully.

Here carefully is an adverb that modifies the verb smells. Using the adjective careful here would not make sense, because it would mean that the dog gives off an odor of carefulness.

Avoiding Common Errors

Bad or Badly?

When you want to describe how you feel, you should use an adjective (Why? Feel is a sense verb; see rule #3 above). So you'd say, "I feel bad." Saying you feel badly would be like saying you play football badly. It would mean that you are unable to feel, as though your hands were partially numb.

Good or Well?

Good is an adjective, so you do not do good or live good, but you do well and live well. Remember, though, that an adjective follows sense-verbs and be-verbs, so you also feel good, look good, smell good, are good, have been good, etc. (Refer to rule #3 above for more information about sense verbs and verbs of appearance.)

Confusion can occur because well can function either as an adverb or an adjective. When well is used as an adjective, it means "not sick" or "in good health." For this specific sense of well, it's OK to say you feel well or are well — for example, after recovering from an illness. When not used in this health-related sense, however, well functions as an adverb; for example, "I did well on my exam."

Double-negatives

Scarcely and hardly are already negative adverbs. To add another negative term is redundant, because in English only one negative is ever used at a time

They found scarcely any animals on the island. (not scarcely no...)
Hardly anyone came to the party. (not hardly no one...)

Sure or Surely?

Sure is an adjective, and surely is an adverb. Sure is also used in the idiomatic expression sure to be. Surely can be used as a sentence-adverb. Here are some examples that show different uses of sure and surely. Adjectives are in blue and adverbs are in red.

I am **sure** that you were there.

Here sure is an adjective that modifies the pronoun I.

He is **surely** ready to take on the project.

Here surely is an adverb that modifies the adjective ready.

She is **sure to be** a great leader.

Here sure to be is an idiomatic phrase that functions as an adjective that modifies the pronoun she.

Surely, environmental destruction has been one of the worst catastrophes brought about by industrial production.

Here surely is an adverb that modifies the verb has been.

Real or Really?

Real is an adjective, and really is an adverb. Here are some examples that demonstrate the difference between real and really.

She did really well on that test.

Here really is an adverb that modifies the adverb well.

Is she really going out with him?

Here really is an adverb that modifies the verb phrase going out.

Popular culture proposes imaginary solutions to real problems.

Here real is an adjective that modifies the noun problems.

Near or Nearly?

Near can function as a verb, adverb, adjective, or preposition. Nearly is used as an adverb to mean "in a close manner" or "almost but not quite." Here are some examples that demonstrate the differences between various uses of near and nearly.

The moment of truth neared.

Here neared is a verb in the past tense.

We are nearly finished with this project.

Here nearly is an adverb that modifies the verb finished.

The cat crept near.

Here near is an adverb of place that modifies the verb crept.

First cousins are more nearly related than second cousins.

Here nearly is an adverb that modifies the verb related.

The detective solves the mystery in a scene near the end of the movie.

Here near is a preposition. The prepositional phrase near the end of the movie modifies the noun scene.

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