The Adjective

Recognize an adjective when you see one.

Adjectives describe nouns by answering one of these three questions: What kind is it? How many are there? Which one is it? An adjective can be a single word, a phrase, or a clause.

Check out these examples:

What kind is it?

Dan decided that the fuzzy green bread would make an unappetizing sandwich.

What kind of bread? Fuzzy and green! What kind of sandwich? Unappetizing!

A friend with a fat wallet will never want for weekend shopping partners.

What kind of friend? One with money to spend!

A towel that is still warm from the dryer is more comforting than a hot fudge sundae.

What kind of towel? One right out of the dryer.

How many are there?

Seven hungry space aliens slithered into the diner and ordered vanilla milkshakes.

How many hungry space aliens? Seven!

The students, five freshmen and six sophomores, braved Dr. Ribley's killer calculus exam.

How many students? Eleven!
The disorganized pile of books, which contained seventeen overdue volumes from the library and five unread class texts, blocked the doorway in Eli's dorm room.

How many books? Twenty-two!

**Which one is it?**

The unhealthiest item from the cafeteria is the steak sub, which will slime your hands with grease.

Which item from the cafeteria? Certainly not the one that will lower your cholesterol!

The cockroach eyeing your cookie has started to crawl this way.

Which cockroach? Not the one crawling up your leg but the one who wants your cookie!

The students who neglected to prepare for Mrs. Mauzy's English class hide in the cafeteria rather than risk their instructor's wrath.

Which students? Not the good students but the lazy slackers.

**Know how to punctuate a series of adjectives.**

To describe a noun fully, you might need to use two or more adjectives. Sometimes a series of adjectives requires commas, but sometimes it doesn't. What makes the difference?

If the adjectives are coordinate, you must use commas between them. If, on the other hand, the adjectives are noncoordinate, no commas are necessary. How do you tell the difference?

**Coordinate Adjectives**

Coordinate adjectives can pass one of two tests. When you 1) reorder the series or 2) insert and between them, they still make sense.

Look at the following example:
The tall, creamy, delicious milkshake melted on the counter while the inattentive waiter flirted with the pretty cashier.

Now read this revision:

The delicious, tall, creamy milkshake melted on the counter while the inattentive waiter flirted with the pretty cashier.

The series of adjectives still makes sense even though the order has changed.

And if you insert and between the adjectives, you still have a logical sentence:

The tall and creamy and delicious milkshake melted on the counter while the inattentive waiter flirted with the pretty cashier.

**Noncoordinate Adjectives**

Noncoordinate adjectives do not make sense when you reorder the series or when you insert and between them.

Check out this example:

Jeanne's two fat Siamese cats hog the electric blanket on cold winter evenings.

If you switch the order of the adjectives, the sentence becomes gibberish:

Fat Siamese two Jeanne's cats hog the electric blanket on cold winter evenings.

Logic will also evaporate if you insert and between the adjectives.

Jeanne's and two and fat and Siamese cats hog the electric blanket on cold winter evenings.

**Form comparative and superlative adjectives correctly.**

To make comparisons, you will often need comparative or superlative adjectives. You use comparative adjectives if you are discussing two people, places, or things. You use superlative adjectives if you have three or more people, places, or things.
Look at these two examples:

Stevie, a suck up who sits in the front row, has a thicker notebook than Nina, who never comes to class.

The thinnest notebook belongs to Mike, a computer geek who scans all notes and handouts and saves them on the hard drive of his laptop.

**Comparative Adjectives**

You can form comparative adjectives two ways. You can add *er* to the end of the adjective, or you can use *more* or *less* before it. Do not, however, do both! You violate the rules of grammar if you claim that you are *more taller*, *more smarter*, or *less faster* than your older brother Fred.

One-syllable adjectives generally take *er* at the end, as in these examples:

Because Fuzz is a smaller cat than Buster, she loses the fights for tuna fish.

For dinner, we ordered a bigger pizza than usual so that we would have cold leftovers for breakfast.

Two-syllable adjectives vary. Check out these examples:

Kelly is lazier than an old dog; he is perfectly happy spending an entire Saturday on the couch, watching old movies and napping.

The new suit makes Marvin more handsome than a movie star.

Use *more* or *less* before adjectives with three or more syllables:

Movies on our new flat-screen television are, thankfully, less colorful; we no longer have to tolerate the electric greens and nuclear pinks of the old unit.

Heather is more compassionate than anyone I know; she watches where she steps to avoid squashing a poor bug by accident.
**Superlative Adjectives**

You can form superlative adjectives two ways as well. You can add *est* to the end of the adjective, or you can use *most* or *least* before it. Do not, however, do both! You violate another grammatical rule if you claim that you are the *most brightest, most happiest*, or *least angriest* member of your family.

One-syllable adjectives generally take *est* at the end, as in these examples:

- These are the **tartest** lemon-roasted squid tentacles that I have ever eaten!

- Nigel, the **tallest** member of the class, must sit in the front row because he has bad eyes; the rest of us crane around him for a glimpse of the board.

Two-syllable adjectives vary. Check out these examples:

- Because Hector refuses to read directions, he made the **crispiest** mashed potatoes ever in the history of instant food.

- Because Isaac has a crush on Ms. Orsini, his English teacher, he believes that she is the **most gorgeous** creature to walk the planet.

Use *most* or *least* before adjectives with three or more syllables:

- The **most frustrating** experience of Desiree's day was arriving home to discover that the onion rings were missing from her drive-thru order.

- The **least believable** detail of the story was that the space aliens had offered Eli a slice of pepperoni pizza before his release.