The Adverb

Recognize an adverb when you find one.

Adverbs tweak the meaning of verbs, adjectives, other adverbs, and clauses.

Read, for example, this sentence:

Our basset hound Bailey sleeps on the living room floor.

Is Bailey a sound sleeper, curled into a tight ball? Or is he a fitful sleeper, his paws twitching while he dreams? The addition of an adverb adjusts the meaning of the verb sleeps so that readers have a clearer picture:

Our basset hound Bailey sleeps peacefully on the living room floor.

Adverbs can be single words, or they can be phrases or clauses. Adverbs answer one of these four questions: How? When? Where? and Why?

Here are single-word examples:

Lenora rudely grabbed the last chocolate cookie.

The adverb rudely fine-tunes the verb grabbed.

Tyler stumbled in the completely dark kitchen.

The adverb completely fine-tunes the adjective dark.

To work on her research essay one more day, Roxanne quite happily accepted the ten-point late penalty.

The adverb quite fine-tunes the adverb happily.

Surprisingly, the restroom stalls had toilet paper.

The adverb surprisingly modifies the entire main clause that follows.

Many single-word adverbs end in ly. In the examples above, you saw peacefully, rudely, completely, happily, and surprisingly.
Not all *ly* words are adverbs, however. *Lively, lonely,* and *lovely* are *adjectives* instead, answering the questions *What kind?* or *Which one?*

Many single-word adverbs have no specific ending, such as *next, not, often, quite, seldom,* and *then.* If you are uncertain whether a word is an adverb or not, consult a *dictionary* to determine its part of speech.

Adverbs can also be multi-word *phrases* and *clauses.*

Here are examples:

*At 2 a.m., a bat flew through Deidre’s open bedroom window.*

The *prepositional phrase at 2 a.m.* indicates *when* the event happened. The second prepositional phrase, *through Deidre’s open bedroom window,* describes *where* the creature traveled.

*With a fork, George thrashed the raw eggs until they foamed.*

The *subordinate clause until they foamed* describes *how* George prepared the eggs.

*Sylvia emptied the carton of milk into the sink because the expiration date had long passed.*

The subordinate clause *because the expiration date had long passed* describes *why* Sylvia poured out the milk.

**Avoid an adverb when a single, stronger word will do.**

Many readers believe that adverbs make sentences bloated and flabby. When you can replace a two-word combination with a single, more powerful word, do so!

For example, avoid *drink quickly* when you mean *gulp,* or *walk slowly* when you mean *saunter,* or *very hungry* when you mean *ravenous.*

**Form comparative and superlative adverbs correctly.**

To make comparisons, you will often need comparative or superlative adverbs. You use comparative adverbs—*more* and *less*—if you are discussing *two* people, places, or things.
You use superlative adverbs—**most** and **least**—if you have three or more people, places, or things.

Consider these two examples:

Beth loves green vegetables, so she eats broccoli **more frequently** than her brother Daniel.

Among the members of her family, Beth eats pepperoni pizza the **least** **often**.

**Do not use an adjective when you need an adverb instead.**

People will often say, "Anthony is **real** smart" or "This pizza sauce is **real** salty."

*Real* is an **adjective**, so it cannot modify another adjective like **smart** or **salty**. What people should say is "Anthony is **really** smart" or "This pizza sauce is **really** salty."

If you train yourself to add the extra **ly** syllable when you speak, you will likely remember it when you write, where its absence might cost you points from a grade or respect from your colleagues!

**Realize that an adverb is not part of the verb.**

Some **verbs** require up to four words to complete the tense. The resulting **verb phrase** has a base or main part as well as **auxiliary** (or **helping**) verbs with it.

When a short adverb such as **also**, **never**, or **not** interrupts, it is still an adverb, not part of the verb.

Read these examples:

For his birthday, Frank would **also** like a jar of dill pickles.

*Would like* = verb; **also** = adverb.

After that dreadful casserole you made last night, Julie will **never** eat tuna or broccoli again.

*Will eat* = verb; **never** = adverb.
Despite the approaching deadline, Sheryl-Ann has not started her research essay.

*Has started* = verb; *not* = adverb.