

1 ♦ Adjectives

Adjectives are words that describe nouns or pronouns. They are an essential type of word in English and occur frequently. So students need to know how to use them correctly. For example, this simple sentence has three adjectives in it: *this*, *simple*, and *three*.

Everyone knows that there are **descriptive adjectives** such as *red*, *delicious*, *turbulent*, and *soft*, but there are other kinds of adjectives, too. **Possessive adjectives**, such as *my* car and *your* car, indicate whose car we are discussing. **Demonstrative adjectives** such as *this* and *that* also help the speaker and listener know which noun is being discussed. Numbers can also be adjectives: *one* idea, *six* ideas. **Articles** (*a*, *an*, *the*) can also be classified as adjectives because they describe a noun as specific or general. **Quantifiers**, such as *many* people, can also be adjectives. Grammatically there are many more types of adjectives than just descriptive adjectives.

3 Common ESL Errors with Adjectives

ESL Error	Explanation
1. *They have a house beautiful.	ESL students often place adjectives after nouns because this is how adjectives function in their native languages.
2. *These trees are very tall.	ESL students try to make adjectives plural because their native language requires adjectives to agree in number with a noun.
3. *I think Arabic is more difficult than English, and I think Spanish is more easy than English.	ESL students often use <i>more</i> to form the comparative form of all adjectives.

2 ♦ The Grammar Answer Key

♦ Question 1 Recognizing an Adjective

How do you know if a word is an adjective?

Adjectives are words that describe nouns or pronouns. Common examples are *good*, *nice*, and *easy*.

There are several ways to recognize an adjective. One important way to recognize an adjective is by its location in the **phrase** or sentence, so word order is important. Adjectives generally occur in two different locations: (1) before a noun or (2) after the verb *be*.

Location	Examples
before a noun	<i>delicious</i> <u>soup</u> , <i>expensive</i> <u>shirts</u> , <i>green</i> <u>leaves</u>
after <i>be</i>	The soup <u>is</u> <i>delicious</i> . The shirts <u>were</u> <i>expensive</i> . The leaves <u>are</u> <i>green</i> .

We can also recognize an adjective by what it is doing in the sentence. Is it describing (*delicious*)? Is it identifying a specific noun (*the*)? Is it telling whether it is near (*this* book) or far (*that* book) from the speaker? Here are several categories of adjectives:

descriptive	<i>delicious, expensive, green</i>
articles	<i>a, an, the</i>
possessive	<i>my, your, her, their</i>
demonstrative	<i>this, that, these, those</i>
quantifier	<i>many, much, any</i>

We can also identify an adjective by the question it answers. Adjectives often tell **which one** (*This book is mine*), **how many** (*I have six books*), **how much** (*No one received any mail today*), or **what kind** (*Raw milk can be dangerous*).

Finally, another way to recognize some adjectives is by the ending (that is, the final suffix). According to the *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* (Biber et al., 1999), the seven most frequent suffixes that mark an adjective are:

1. **-al** (*final, natural, social*)
2. **-ent** (*current, different, excellent*)
3. **-ive** (*active, passive, positive*)
4. **-ous/-ious** (*famous, obvious, serious*)
5. **-ate** (*accurate, private, separate*)
6. **-ful** (*beautiful, helpful, useful*)
7. **-less** (*endless, helpless, homeless*)

In addition, a useful and common adjective suffix is *-y* (*crazy, easy, funny, health, hilly, juicy, trendy, windy*).

However, many smaller adjectives do not have any overt endings: *cold, short, young*.

♦ Question 2 Order of Adjectives

What is the correct order of adjectives? Is it *a red book* or *a book red*? What happens if you have two adjectives? Is it *cotton white socks* or *white cotton socks*?

This is really two questions: (1) Do adjectives come before or after nouns? and (2) when there are two or more adjectives, what is the correct sequence?

A red book is correct. In English, adjectives come before nouns, which is also the case with Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Russian, German, and Bengali. In contrast, adjectives come after nouns in Spanish, Arabic, Vietnamese, Haitian Creole, French, Portuguese, Marshallese, and Italian. Therefore, Spanish speakers, for example, will often put adjectives after nouns in English, producing the error **a book red*.

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White cotton socks is correct. The general rule is that adjectives come in this order: (1) opinion, (2) size, (3) age, (4) shape, (5) color, (6) origin, (7) material. *White* is a color and *cotton* is a material, so we have to put *white* before *cotton*. Many grammar books explain this rule, and students spend a lot of time memorizing the sequence and then completing many exercises. Although this information may certainly be useful for an English exam, it may not be so valuable for actually speaking English. The average native speaker tends to only use one or occasionally two adjectives to describe any given noun in everyday speech. Therefore, students who use more than two descriptive adjectives consecutively before a noun might sound odd.

This sequencing rule is also a good example of a grammar point that native speakers are never taught. It is not a problem for them since they acquired the correct order at an early age. This also means that if you ask native speakers who are not specially trained to teach English to non-native speakers why we say *white cotton socks* and not *cotton white socks*, they cannot answer the question. They usually say "It just sounds right," but that is not an explanation and not very helpful.

One final point here is that English also frequently uses nouns as adjectives. Examples include *a wool sweater*, *a bus station*, *a dinner invitation*, *a flower garden*, and *a wedding cake*. In academic or technical English, it is common to have multiple nouns functioning as adjectives. *A history test* is a test about history. *A history test question* is a question from a test about history. *A U.S. history test question* is a question from a test about the history of the U.S. When there is a true adjective and a noun functioning as an adjective, the true adjective goes first: *a new wool sweater*, not **a wool new sweater*. In general, the more adjective-like a word is, the farther to the left it goes. The more noun-like a word is, the farther to the right (or closer to the noun) it goes.