

'Flying direct' or 'flying directly'? Knowing your adverbs from your adjectives

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In this issue of *PEGboard*, the aspect of English usage I'm focusing on is the confusion that often exists between adverbs and adjectives and their correct usage. Incorrect usage of these word classes (or parts of speech) can be particularly glaring – and damaging to an author's or editor's image. Mastering them is therefore essential, whether you're wanting to write correctly or polish an author's words to show them off to best effect.

In this article I'll be looking specifically at the following aspects of these word classes:

- avoiding the use of adjectives when adverbs should be used;
- where to position adverbs in relation to verbs.

Adjectives are to nouns as adverbs are to verbs

The first point to note is that adverbs and adjectives have entirely different functions in sentences. Adjectives have a relatively simple job to perform: they qualify nouns and pronouns. In doing so, they usually precede the noun they qualify or, when they are adjective complements, they follow forms of the verb 'to be' (eg *am*, *are*, *is*, *was*, *were*) or other stative verbs (eg *feel*, *seem*, *appear*). In this position, they elaborate on the subject of the sentence. For example:

- The *well* patient was discharged from hospital. (adjective before noun, *patient*)
- I am *well*, thank you. (adjective complement, elaborating on *I*)

Adverbs, the real multi-taskers in sentences, have the more complicated job: they modify (or intensify) verbs, adjectives and other adverbs. For example:

- That was *well* done! (adverb modifying verb, *done*)
- The actor performed *well*. (adverb modifying verb, *performed*)
- She is *well* known around here. (adverb intensifying participle, or verb-adjective, *known*)
- The actor performed *rather* better than expected. (adverb intensifying adverb, *better*)
- The actor performed *exceptionally* well. (adverb intensifying adverb, *well*)

Table 1

Adverbs with -ly ending	Adverbs without -ly ending
fairly	often
currently	fast
truly	always
agreeably	somewhat
daily	never
directly	very
annually	everywhere
healthily	quite

Table 2

Adjective	Adverb
fair	fairly
current	currently
true	truly
agreeable	agreeably
day	daily
direct	directly
annual	annually
healthy	healthily



Many adverbs end in *-ly*, which clearly distinguishes them from adjectives, eg *exceptionally* (versus exceptional), but some do not, eg *well* and *rather*. Table 1 below shows further examples of both.

Now, if you study the words in the column on the left (see Table 1) carefully, you'll probably notice that they're adverbs derived from adjectives (see Table 2). >

Fortunately, there are some patterns to guide you in the formation of adverbs. Take note of the following:

- *true* becomes *truly* by removing the final *e* and adding *-ly*;
- *day* ends in *-y*, which is replaced by *-ily*;
- *agreeable* ends in *-able*, which becomes *-ably*;
- *healthy* ends in *-thy*, which is replaced by *-thily*.

Exceptions to these patterns are the adjectives *weekly* and *monthly*. They perform the function of both adjective and adverb. For example:

- I subscribe to a *weekly* newspaper. (adjective)
- It is delivered to me *weekly*. (adverb)
- My *monthly* medication keeps me healthy. (adjective)
- It has to be administered *monthly*. (adverb)

Another exception is *friendly*, which, although it ends in *-ly*, is only ever an adjective. For example:

- The *friendly* boy introduced himself to his classmates. (adjective qualifying noun, *boy*)
- He approached his classmates in a *friendly* manner. (adjective qualifying noun, *manner*, but the prepositional phrase *in a friendly manner* plays the role of an adverb modifying the verb *approached*)

But what about *direct* and *directly* in the title of this article? Or *slow* and *slowly*? Which is more correct? Well, neither: their usage is largely determined by the context. For example:

- Let's just take it *slow*, shall we. We walked forward *slowly*.
- Fly *direct* to New York. He walked *directly* home.

However, this doesn't give us a licence always to use all adjectives as adverbs. In the following sentences, the usage is incorrect:

- My daughter sang so *beautiful* in the concert. (*sang so beautifully*, an adverb)
- Play *nice* now, children. (*play nicely*, an adverb)
- He calls me *regular* every week. (*calls regularly*, but *he makes regular calls* – adjective)
- Dress *appropriate* for the occasion. (*dress appropriately*, but *his dress is appropriate* – adjective)

Adjectives ending in *-able* and *-ible*

One of the real dilemmas facing writers and editors is when to use either *-able* or *-ible* as a suffix. English is rather unhelpful with conventions here, but one fairly reliable rule of thumb is this: *When the root word is complete without*

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the suffix, then it is more likely to be **-able**; when the root is incomplete without the suffix, then it is more likely to be **-ible**:

Adjectives ending in <i>-able</i>	Adjectives ending in <i>-ible</i>
changeable	feasible
commendable	horrible
reliable	reprehensible
remarkable	sensible
saleable	terrible

Do your best to identify and correct each of these aspects of adjective and adverb abuse. In doing so, you will convert your authors' texts into polished communications that will impress. Next time, I'll devote the column to problematic pronouns. Until then, happy editing! 🍀

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