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Back to the Basics, Part V: Adjectives

Tenielle Fordyce-Ruff

As I write this, school is about to start again. Each August, I walk back into a classroom filled with eager new students. We cover a lot of ground in a few short months, but we also have to start with some basics. Repeating each year the same basics with new students reminds me how everyone comes to writing with different knowledge and how, even if the writer understands the concept, a refresher is always nice.

As it has been over a year since I wrote about the basics, I thought I would provide my readers with a primer on adjectives to go along with the early ones I wrote about various parts of speech and punctuation.

Adjectives: What are those?

In grammar terms, an adjective is a word that modifies a noun or pronoun. You might have learned that it's a "describing word" back in elementary school.

Adjectives tell the reader what sort, how many, what size or whose. Adjectives can also be used to add more detail to a noun.

The child was hit by a red car.

The Court issued a long opinion.

Or to limit a noun.

This time, I decided to go back to the basics.

Three defendants agreed to settle.

Most adjectives derive from a noun. For instance, *hammered* comes from *hammer* and *perilous* comes from *peril*. And most adjectives are formed by the addition of a suffix: -able, -al, -ary, -ed, -en, -esque, -ful, -ible, -ic, -ish, -ive, -less, -like, -ly, -ous, -some, and -y.

A proper adjective comes from a proper noun.



Some businesses accept Canadian dollars.

She will arrive in a New York minute.

Proper adjectives are always capitalized, but the word that the adjective modifies is capitalized only if it is a proper noun.

Articles: Are they adjectives, too?

In short, yes. Articles — *the*, *a*, and *an* — are limiting adjectives. *The* can be used to indicate something definite: something well understood, something that is about to be described, or something important.

The plaintiff moved for summary judgment.

The deponent who refused to attend his deposition was found in contempt.

The grand prize for finishing this article is a better understanding of adjectives!

A and *an* are used to indicate something indefinite: a non-specific person, thing, or object that is indistinguishable from other members of the class.¹

A plaintiff must serve the defendant within six months of filing an action.

Of course, there are a few exceptions to these general rules. Sometimes *the* can be used to refer to a generic class.

Adjectives tell the reader what sort, how many, what size or whose. Adjectives can also be used to add more detail to a noun.

The courts are interested in limiting the word limit in briefs.

And sometimes *a* or *an* can be used to refer to something definite.

The students watched a fascinating trial yesterday.

Where do I put them?

Generally, adjectives go before the noun they modify. If however, you want to add emphasis, the ad-

jective is following a linking verb, or it is standard usage, the adjective should follow the noun.

For reasons innumerable, the law should change.

The sky was clear that day.

She signed her will in front of a notary public.

Likewise, if the adjective modifies a pronoun, it usually follows the pronoun.

He was insensitive.

Finally, if the adjective is modifying a noun phrase, and the noun phrase includes a possessive, the adjective should follow the possessive noun.

The firm's former managing partner left to open a boutique practice.

What about dates as adjectives?

Legal writers use dates as adjectives all the time, so we know dates can function as adjectives. The difficulty for us comes from knowing when to use (or not use) a comma when a date functions as an adjective.

Quick rule: If the date has only two parts, (month and day, or month and year) don't use a comma. If it has all three parts, use two commas — one before and one after the year.

The November 13 contract included a liquidated damages clause.

The November 2009 contract included a liquidated damages clause.

The November 13, 2009, contract included a liquidated damages clause.

Of course, using the full date as an adjective is awkward, so use it infrequently. Another option, if you must use the full date is to use an "of" construction.

The contract of November 13, 2009, included a liquidated damages clause.

Beyond the Basics

Now that you have a handle on the basics of adjectives, let's move

on to a few bonus points: The use or omission of articles and predicate adjectives.

How can the use or omission of articles change the meaning of my sentence?

The absence of an article can change a sentence's meaning. Take these two sentences.

The discovery responses provided little clarity.

The discovery responses provided a little clarity.

In the first example, the discovery responses did nothing to clarify the situation. In the second, the situation was somewhat clarified by the discovery responses.

What are predicate adjectives?

This one is for the grammar nerds out there. A predicate adjective follows a linking verb, but modifies the subject of the sentence. Linking verbs are either *to be* verbs or intransitive verbs. They are called linking verbs because they link the subject to the predicate — the rest of the sentence.²

I was thrilled to write about adjectives.

I felt bad that I couldn't include more.

These adjectives, although they follow a verb, both tell you about my excitement.

The difficulty for us comes from knowing when to use (or not use) a comma when a date functions as an adjective.

Sources

- *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 222-229 (16th ed.)
- Bryan A. Garner, *The Redbook: A Manual on Legal Style*, 172 (2d ed.)

Endnotes

1. The choice between *a* and *an* depends on the sound of the word following the article. When the word begins with a vowel sound, no matter the spelling, use *an*. When the word begins with a consonant sound, including y, h, and w, use *a*. Thus, you would write about a historic occasion but an hour.
2. For more on intransitive verbs, see my article *Beyond the Basics: Transitive, Intransitive, Ditransitive, and Ambitransitive Verbs*, *The Advocate* (February 2015).

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