Compound adjectives and further information

Compound adjectives

Compound adjectives consist of more than one word and are usually hyphenated. They are formed in different ways. Here are some examples:<?xml:namespace prefix = "o" ns = "urn:schemas-microsoft-com:office:office" />

Construction	Examples
number + noun	a 4-hour flight a three-week supply two-bedroom apartments a 20-page report a 15-minute presentation
adjective + noun	free-range eggs a last-minute change a full-length dress deep-sea diving a middle-class area
adjective + present participle	easy-going colleagues a hard-working manager a long-lasting relationship French-speaking Canada a good-looking man
noun + present participle	labour-saving devices record-breaking profits mouth-watering fruit fun-loving friends a man-eating shark
adjective + past participle [see note below]	kind-hearted people middle-aged men a left-handed tennis player a dark-haired woman old-fashioned values

adverb + past participle [often with 'well']	**a well-known actor** **a well-written book** **well-dressed people** **a brightly-lit room** **densely-populated towns**
noun + past participle	**sun-tanned tourists** **a customer-focused company** **a nuclear-powered industry** **a Paris-based team** **corn-fed chickens**
noun + adjective	**a world-famous singer** **sky-blue curtains** **a cost-effective solution** **a smoke-free zone** **user-friendly instructions**
comparative or superlative adjective + other word	**the lowest-priced car** **the shorter-term loan** **a better-looking man** **a lower-risk option** **the highest-paid directors**
prefix + other word [see prefixes for more information]	**a self-motivated individual** **anti-government propaganda** **post-natal depression** **an auto-immune disease** **ex-military equipment**
more than two words, sometimes derived from a short phrase or expression	**an out-of-the-ordinary experience** **value-for-money cars** **a door-to-door salesman** **a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity** **a five-year-old daughter**

Describing people

There are a lot of compound nouns used to describe people in which the second word relates to a part of the body and resembles a past participle although there is no related verb:<?xml:namespace prefix = "o" ns = "urn:schemas-microsoft-com:office:office" />

I have a red-haired daughter and a blond-haired son.
He's tall and broad-shouldered.

Here are some more examples:

blue/brown/green-eyed
brown/black/fair/dark-haired
rosy-cheeked
slim-hipped
long-legged

Hyphens with compound adjectives

1. **Most two-word compound adjectives are hyphenated. This is sometimes necessary in order to avoid ambiguity. For example:<?xml:namespace prefix = "o" ns = "urn:schemas-microsoft-com:office:office" />**

   I saw a man-eating shark. [I saw a shark - the kind of shark that eats people.]
   I saw a man eating shark. [I saw a man who was eating shark.]

   The hand-delivered invitations were much appreciated. ✔
   The hand delivered invitations were much appreciated. ✖ **[Because it mightseem, when starting to read the sentence, that just a hand and not a persondelivered the invitations.]**

   He's a used-book seller.
   He's a used book seller. [Are the books used or the seller?]

2. **We always use hyphens with multi-word adjectives in order to make the meaning clear:**

   It was a never-to-be-forgotten trip. ✔
   It was a never to be forgotten trip. ✖

3. **We do not need to use hyphens when multi-word adjectives aren't directly before the noun. For example:**

   He likes to keep up to date with mobile phone technology.

He was nothing out of the ordinary.
He sells books door to door.

The same is true of adverb + past participles:

The room was brightly lit.
The staff were highly motivated.

But those with 'well' remain hyphenated:

He isn't well-known in the UK.
Her children are well-behaved.

4. **The word 'ill' used to be used as an adverb and meant 'badly'. It survives in certain expressions and compound adjectives:**

   The employees in these factories are often ill-treated.
   He was ill-prepared for the exam.

5. **We do not always form a compound adjective when placing an adverb and past participle together. For example:**

Hyphenated - a descriptive adjective, what something is like	Not hyphenated - primarily about how or when something is done
It's a densely-populated area. [crowded]	It's a publicly run service.
These people have deeply-rooted traditions. [old]	Their deposit was partially refunded.
It's a widely-held belief. [common]	They discussed the recently launched products.

6. **There are different opinions about whether some compound adjectives should be hyphenated at all. If you are unsure, look in a good dictionary for examples.**

7. **Compound adjectives are not fixed in the language so, in informal conversation, we sometimes invent new ones when needed using the above constructions.**

Nationality

We use adjectives for nationality in the same way as other adjectives - before a noun or after a verb:<?xml:namespace prefix = "o" ns = "urn:schemas-microsoft-com:office:office" />

I met a Spanish man at the conference.
We have a Swedish manager.
He's French.
They look Chinese.

However, the adjectives ending in 'an' can also be used alone as nouns:

I met a German/an American/an Italian. ✔
I met a Swedish/a French/a Japanese. ✘

Note that adjectives relating to countries, continents, states, cities and other regions all begin with a capital letter:

They had to close their European plants.
She has a Parisian boyfriend.

Many of them are irregular, including the unusual examples relating to British cities below, so check in a good dictionary if you aren't sure.

Liverpool - Liverpudlian
Manchester - Mancunian
Glasgow - Glaswegian

Using adjectives as nouns

1. **Some adjectives can be used as nouns with 'the' to talk about a group of people or things:<?xml:namespace prefix = "o" ns = "urn:schemas-microsoft-com:office:office" />**

   We need to care for the elderly. [= elderly people]
   Robin Hood robbed the rich to give to the poor!
   We need to forget the old and focus on the new. [e.g. technology, rules, methods]

Here are some more examples:

the young
the homeless
the unemployed
the brave
the weak
the strong
the necessary

This includes some adjectives for nationality ending in 'ese', 'ish' and 'ch' when talking about a population generally:

The Japanese are often silent for long periods.
There are a lot of cultural differences between the English and the French.

With nationalities ending in 'an', no article is necessary - it is possible to use one butwe usually omit it:

Americans are often friendly.
Italians enjoy spending time with their family.

2. **Some but not all adjectives for nationality can be used as nouns with articles to talk about a person. These include the adjectives ending in 'an' and 'i' as well as a few irregular ones such as Greek or Swiss. For example:**

I spoke to an American/a Pakistani/a Greek at the conference. ✔
I spoke to an English/a French/a Japanese at the conference. ✘

See articles for more information.

British and American speakers of English use the same structure in conversation to talk about some foreign meals and restaurants. For example:

We always have an Indian on Friday nights.
Have you tried the new Italian in the High Street?
I didn't fancy cooking last night so we ordered a Chinese.

Position of adjectives

Adjectives are almost always placed before a noun or after the verb 'to be' but there are some exceptions:

	Before the noun	After the noun or other structures

A few adjectives can be placed directly after a noun when they are part of a fixed or archaic expression or title.		**the Attorney General** **the President Elect** **the Princess Royal** **the devil incarnate** **a court martial**
The word 'proper' has two meanings.	**I can't do this job without the proper equipment. [real, correct or suitable]**	**I'd like to live in the city proper, not the outskirts. [the actual city, the main part]** **The delegates are arriving at 10am for coffee but the seminar proper starts at 11.**
Some adjectives appear to be used directly after nouns but, in fact, the sentences are elliptical. **Some of the adjectives used in this way have more than one meaning.**	**We used all the available resources.** **It's the only possible option.** **The concerned employees complained to the boss. [the employees were worried]** **I spoke to the present manager. [the current manager]** **He's a responsible person. [sensible, reliable]**	**We used all the resources (that were) available.** **It's the only option (that's) possible.** **The manager thanked the people concerned. [the appropriate people]** **I spoke to all the managers present. [the managers who were present, in that place]** **We need to find the person responsible. [the person who did something or is responsible for dealing with something]**
To talk about age or size.		**The room is 4m long and 3m wide.** **He's 30 years old.**

Some adjectives, especially related to feelings, including those ending in 'ed', are not usually used directly before a noun. **Other examples include adjectives with the prefix 'a'.**	**He's a pleased manager. ✗** **I spoke to an annoyed woman. ✗** **I think my ill colleagues should stay at home. ✗** **an awake/asleep/alone/alive person ✗**	**The manager is pleased. ✓** **She seemed annoyed when I spoke to her. ✓** **My colleagues who are ill should stay at home. ✓** **He's awake. ✓** **I saw someone asleep on the train. ✓**
There are a few adjectives which are *only* placed directly before a noun.	**He lives in northern/southern/ eastern/western France. ✓** **We had countless applicants for the job. ✓** **They have an indoor swimming pool. ✓**	**His part of France is northern/ southern/ eastern/western. ✗** **The applicants were countless. ✗** **They have a swimming pool which is indoor. ✗**

Nouns as adjectives

We can use nouns (including gerunds) as adjectives. They answer the question. 'what kind?' or 'for what purpose?' For example:

a brain surgeon
history teachers
detective novels
a horror film
football boots
an arctic wolf
a car door
a table leg
a food cupboard
a Christmas cake

Note that like others, these adjectives do not take an 's' when the noun is plural:

We operate services desks. ✗
We operate service desks. ✓

Sometimes, we use more than one noun:

staff development costs
a winter sports clothes shop
an army truck manufacturing plant

And we can use other kinds of adjectives in front of them:

a big winter sports clothes shop

Note that we do not use commas between nouns which function as adjectives.

Participles

Some present participles can be used as adjectives. For example:

a laughing man [a man who is/was laughing]
a falling tree
a crying baby
a bleeding hand

Some 'ed' and irregular past participles can be used as adjectives. For example:

an injured dog
an abandoned car
a painted wall
a broken leg
a lost handbag
a frozen pizza

The past participles that can be used as adjectives are usually those which can be used in a passive sense:

baked potatoes [potatoes which were baked by someone]
stolen money [money which was stolen]

a laughed man

However, there are a few past participles which can't be used in a passive sense but can function as adjectives. For example:

a fallen tree
an advanced student
a retired lawyer
a married couple

If you are unsure, check in a good dictionary.

Word order

Note that with nouns as adjectives, the word order is determined by working backwards:

> **a winter sports clothes shop**
>
> **What kind of shop? - clothes. What kind of clothes? - sports clothes. What kind of sports? - winter sports.**

Before a noun, other adjectives are usually used in the order of the table below:

Opinion	Size	Age	Shape	Colour	Other	Origin	Material	Purpose
lovely	big	old	round	red	famous	French	wooden	walking
horrible	huge	young	square	green	honest	Asian	metal	shopping
nice	tiny	new	oval	cream	useful	northern	plastic	holiday
great	tall	ancient	triangular	auburn	happy	oriental	cotton	garden

Note that

1. **We don't often use more than two adjectives together.**

2. **This is a guide rather than a fixed rule. You may see slight variations of this table and sometimes 'opinion' and 'size' are reversed, especially with 'ing' adectives:**

   We had a huge, delicious pizza.
   It was a long, boring meeting.
   I read a short, interesting article on that topic.

3. **When we use more than one adjective, they usually are separated by commas:**

   We have a small, round, wooden table.

Although we tend not to use them after adjectives of opinion:

I bought some beautiful red, Italian, leather shoes.

4. **Some adjectives are so closely associated with a noun that the two together**

are seen as a single unit e.g. 'green tea' or 'short story' so we do not separate them in order to follow the usual rule or use commas:

We bought some sparkling white wine.
We bought some white, sparkling wine. ✖

He's an honest young man. ✔
He's a young, honest man. ✖

I read some old short stories. ✔
I read some short, old stories. ✖

5. **Adjectives for opinions can be divided into two categories - 'general' and 'specific'. The table above has 'general' examples - these adjectives can be used to describe a wide range of objects or people:**

a good chair
a good meal
a good manager

Sometimes adjectives are more specific to the noun they are describing. For example:

a comfortable chair
a delicious meal
a friendly manager

If we use both, the general adjective comes before the specific:

a lovely, comfortable chair
a nice, tasty meal
a pleasant, friendly manager

6. **When we use two adjectives from some of the categories in the table, we separate them with 'and'. If we use more than two, we need commas and 'and':**

We have young and old people in this team.
I have a metal and plastic chair.
My scarf is red, green and beige.

7. **When not placed directly before a noun, the word order is less strict. For example:**

My new table is wooden, round and beautiful.

Base and extreme adjectives

Some adjectives can be categorised as 'base' or 'extreme':

Base adjectives	Extreme adjectives
cold	freezing
hot	boiling, scorching
good	wonderful, amazing, brilliant, fabulous
bad	horrible, terrible, awful
interesting	fascinating
hungry	starving, famished
big	huge, enormous, gigantic
attractive	beautiful, gorgeous

This is important when deciding which adverb of degree to use. We use 'very' with base adjectives and 'absolutely' with extreme adjectives:

She lives in a very big house.
She lives in an absolutely enormous house.

We can use 'really' with both kinds of adjectives - it is more conversational than 'very':

I saw a really good film last night.
It's really freezing at the moment.

Gradable and non-gradable adjectives

Some adjectives can be categorised as 'gradable' or 'non-gradable'. We use gradable adjectives for qualities that vary in intensity or degree. We can ask the question, 'How..?'

How hot/big/important/strong/old is it?

With non-gradable adjectives, there is no question of degree. For example, a person is either dead or not; a cup is either full or not. For this reason, extreme adjectives are also non-gradable as are classifying adjectives such as electrical, wooden or indoor.

Gradable adjectives	Non-gradable adjectives

angry	**right**
busy	**wrong**
intelligent	**possible**
cold	**impossible**
deep	**unique**
fast	**essential**
happy	**empty**
high	**delicious**
funny	**medical**
soft	**chemical**
useful	**married**
friendly	**lost**

We do not usually use adverbs of degree with non-gradable adjectives. However, in informal conversation, we sometimes use intensifiers that mean 'completely' for emphasis:

> **We couldn't get into the restaurant last night - it was completely full.**
> **You're absolutely right; I couldn't agree more.**
> **Are you entirely certain about that?**

And 'quite' is sometimes used in conversation with some non-gradable adjectives to mean 'completely' or 'absolutely'.

> **You're quite right.**
> **The meal was quite delicious.**

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