

A Word, Please: Verbs modified by adverbs

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“Many older adults said they feel positively about their lives,” the New York Times reported recently.

That sentence probably sounds as acceptable to you as it did to the Times editors. But what if they wrote instead: “Many older adults feel happily about their lives”? The structure is identical, but suddenly the grammar seems wrong. The adjective “happy” would seem like a better choice — many adults feel happy — than the adverb. So “happily” makes a good test of whether the New York Times’ sentence required an adverb or an adjective.

Well-informed people can disagree about whether the Times should have used “positive” instead of “positively.” But in my view, they made a mistake. They should have used the adjective “positive.” To understand why requires a quick look at which verbs are modified by adverbs.

We were all taught in elementary school that adverbs modify verbs and adjectives modify nouns: Happy adults sing happily. That’s true, but there’s more to the story.

There’s a whole category of verbs that take adjectives, not adverbs, as their complements. They’re called copular or linking verbs, and they either refer back to the subject or deal with the senses.

The most common copular verb is “be,” along with its conjugated forms including “is,” “am” and “are.” Native English speakers understand intuitively that “be” works differently from other verbs. Think about these sentences: He is nicely. We are hungrily. I am sadly. In every case, an adverb comes after the verb and in every case that’s obviously the wrong choice. All those sentences need an adjective: He is nice. We are hungry. I am sad. That’s because the verb “be” is a copular verb. It refers back to the subject. And because subjects are nouns or pronouns, they’re modified not by adverbs but by adjectives.

Verbs that deal with the senses also take adjectives instead of adverbs, but the reason is a little harder to understand. The coffee smells good, not well, because the verb “smells” isn’t describing something the coffee is doing. When a bloodhound follows a scent to track down a fugitive, the bloodhound smells well because you’re actually describing the action of smelling. But after a bath, the dog smells good.

Copular verbs create the most confusion when people talk about feeling pity for someone else or remorse. They often say, “I feel badly.” When they do, they’re trying to follow that rule they learned in school, that adverbs modify verbs, but they don’t understand that the rules that govern regular verbs don’t apply to “feel.” Those rules only apply to “feel” if you want to modify the action of feeling — for example, saying why someone is bad at reading braille: because they feel badly.

Because “I feel badly” is so commonly used to express remorse or pity, it’s an established idiom — meaning it’s acceptable even though it’s not grammatical. So you’re OK to use it if you prefer. But it’ll make you sound like you’re trying and failing to use perfect grammar. If grammar is important to you, say “I feel bad” instead.

With some verbs, the question of whether to use an adjective or an adverb is subtle. For example, when you slice meat into very thin slices, you’re slicing it thin, not thinly. That’s because you’re not describing the manner in which you perform the action — you aren’t acting thinly — you were making the meat itself thin. And because meat is a noun, the adjective in “Slice the meat thin” makes more sense than the adverb “thinly.”

So remember that adverbs aren’t quite as simple as your elementary school teacher led you to believe. If you need a modifier after a verb like “be,” “seem,” “appear” or “act,” or even after a verb describing one of the six senses, an adjective is probably the best choice.

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