

Comparative and Superlative Adjectives

Student Objective

To understand the function of the three basic kinds of adjectives.

Background

Most students have gleaned ideas about comparison adjectives unconsciously, but it is necessary to teach the concept explicitly. Adjectives come in three kinds: *positive*, which modify nouns without comparison; and *comparative* and *superlative*, which modify nouns in relation to other nouns—*comparative* adjectives referring to one of two nouns, *superlative* adjectives referring to one of three or more nouns. This may sound difficult, but examples will clear it up:

- 1) The tree is *tall*.
Tall is a positive adjective.
- 2) This tree is *taller* than that one.
Taller is a comparative adjective.
- 3) That tree is the *tallest* one.
Tallest is a superlative adjective.

It is also important to teach irregular adjectives, some of which are:

good, better, best
bad, worse, worst
many, more, most

Lesson

Beautifuler Than a Summer Day?

Copy the poem “Adjectives” by Mary O’Neill and use it to discuss the three basic kinds of adjective. During the discussion, try to elicit

from students the fact that certain adjectives don’t have simple comparative and superlative forms, but instead must be preceded by *more*, *less*, and *most*.

Adjectives

Adjectives tell you the quality of a person, place, or thing

As *pretty* girl, *big* city, *fast* horse, *golden* ring.

Some adjectives increase their strength

By going on to greater length:

As *pretty* when you’re *positive*
she’s fair,

But *prettier* whenever you *compare*,

And see a second more exquisite face

Among the members of the human race.

But *prettiest* is where you reach
the top—

Superlative—and there you have
to stop.

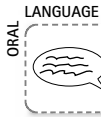
Wrap-up

Rather than start out with a sentence-writing drill requiring students to use comparatives and superlatives, tell students that their task is to create comparative and superlative *nouns* and *verbs*. This should yield some ridiculous words (i.e. *deskiest*, *climbier*), the effect of which, in turn, will be a fun lesson, and the activity will also unobtrusively drive home the fact that only adjectives are comparative or superlative. Of course, writing accurate comparatives and superlatives is also a valuable activity, and a straight exercise might be the perfect way to bring the class back to focus.

(Note: While working with the class on proper comparatives and superlatives, make a

quiet point of correcting students' use of *then* for *than*.

Extension Activities

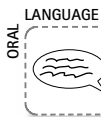


Alliterative Superlative Adjective

In groups of three (or two or four, if necessary), students choose a noun together and then separately find superlative adjectives that start with the same letter as the noun.

cave: coldest, clammiest, creepiest
bat: biggest, blackest, buggiest

Dictionaries will make this activity more productive and enjoyable.



He Was Bigger Than a Small Car!

Ask students to get into groups of three (or group them yourself), explaining that each group will tell a "fish tale." The group chooses a noun as a character. The first student tells something about the noun and describes it with a positive adjective. The second student then uses the comparative form of the adjective, and the third student tells the biggest whopper of them all, using the adjective's superlative form. Hold enough rounds of "fish tales" that everyone has a chance to use the superlative form.

Here's a simple example:
The wrestler was very strong.
The wrestler was stronger than an ox.
The wrestler was the strongest athlete at the Olympics.



Literature Connection

Tall tales are known for exaggerations of size, strength, bravery, and so on, and there are many such tales to share with students. After reading a tall tale with your students, challenge them to make comparative

and superlative statements about the characters.

Two famous tall tales are:

Pecos Bill

by Steven Kellogg, 1986, William Morrow & Company, Inc., NY

When Bill dodged the snake's fangs, it slapped its coils around him.

The snake squeezed hard, but Bill squeezed harder and he didn't let up until every drop of poison was out of that reptile, leaving it skinny as a rope and mild as a goldfish.

The Bunyans

by Audrey Wood, 1996, The Blue Sky Press, NY

After all that sculpting, Little Jean's shoes were full of sand. Pa knew Ma Bunyan wouldn't want her clean floors dirtied up, so he told Little Jean to sit down and empty out his shoes.

The sand from Little Jean's shoes blew away on the eastern wind and settled down a state away. It covered a valley ten miles long, making sand dunes eight hundred feet high. Everyone knows that's how the Great Dunes of Colorado came to be.

The next book uses ingenious and imaginative superlatives to describe how a mother loves her two sons:

I Love You the Purplest

by Barbara M. Joose, 1996, Chronicle Books, San Francisco, CA

"Mama, who has the most worms?" he asked.

Mama smiled.

"Max, your can is full of the liveliest worms. And Julian, your can has the juiciest."



Spinning the Wildest Yarn

Have students write a tall tale. They may certainly follow the format of the books mentioned above. Or perhaps your part of the country includes a famous desert, lake, or mountain that needs a tall tale to explain its existence and spread its fame. Remind students

that part of their task is to use precise, ingenious comparative and superlative adjectives.



A Superlative Poem

Students can also write poems that build their form from the three basic kinds of adjective.

Little,
The dog is little.
Littler,

The puppy is littler.
Littlest,
The flea is littlest.



Writers' Wall

Students can add to the Wall all three forms of an adjective when they come across one they like. You'll probably want to post all irregular forms for easy reference.