



Comma or No Comma: Understanding Adjectives

Workshop taught by Lora Doncea

Two Types of Adjectives:

1. _____
2. _____

CUMULATIVE adjectives must be written sequentially in a specific order:

1. _____ (four, a few, several)
2. _____ (delicious, charming, beautiful, lazy, soft, hard, thick, flimsy)
3. _____ (tall, huge, tiny, three-inch)
4. _____ (old, young, new, ten-year-old)
5. _____ (long, short, circular, triangular, square, symmetrical)
6. _____ (black, white, black-and-white, bluish)
7. _____ (polka-dot, striped, checked)
8. _____ (Swedish, Hawaiian, Lutheran, Southern)
9. _____ (glass, wooden, cotton)
10. _____ (*sports car, baseball jersey, marching orders*)

Examples of cumulative adjectives:

- I saw two stunning antique Victorian brass candle holders.

Write the adjective categories: _____

- He owns a gorgeous new red Italian sports car.

Write the adjective categories: _____

- She has a delicate heart-shaped face and big blue eyes.

Write the adjective categories: _____

NOTE: Cumulative adjectives are not separated with commas.

NOTE: You wouldn't use "and" in between cumulative adjectives.

COORDINATE adjectives are two or more adjectives in *the same* category (above). When you use adjectives in the same category, they are essentially equal in importance. So they can be written in any order.

Coordinate adjectives *need* a comma to separate them.

Examples of coordinate adjectives:

I can't lift the heavy, bulky box.

I can't lift the bulky, heavy box.

He's a lazy, no-good, worthless bum.

He's a no-good, lazy, worthless bum.

He's a worthless, lazy, no-good bum.

She wore an exquisite, breathtaking, dazzling wedding gown.

She wore a breathtaking, exquisite, dazzling wedding gown.

She wore a dazzling, breathtaking, exquisite wedding gown.

NOTE: **Coordinate** adjectives use a comma or the word "and" in between them.

I can't lift the heavy *and* bulky box.

(I can't lift the heavy, bulky box.)

He's a lazy *and* no-good *and* worthless bum.

(He's a lazy, no-good, worthless bum.)

She wore an exquisite *and* breathtaking *and* dazzling wedding gown.

(She wore an exquisite, breathtaking, and dazzling wedding gown.)

COMBINING Adjectives:

In some instances, **coordinate** adjectives are combined with **cumulative** adjectives.

It can be confusing, and many writers just put commas between all of them.

Let's use the rules above to see how to punctuate them accurately.

Question: It is "Her thick, red, curly hair" or "Her thick red curly hair" or "Her thick, curly red hair" or "Her red, thick, curly hair"?

In this case, we are using two **coordinate** adjectives (in the same category) along with a **cumulative** adjective. Let's identify them:

1. Thick = _____ ("thick" is subjective)
2. Curly = _____ ("curly" is not a shape—we all see hair differently. Wavy, bouncy, kinky, frizzy.)
3. Red = _____

Answer: It could be written any of the following ways:

"She had **thick, curly red** hair."

"She had **curly, thick red** hair."

"She had **thick and curly red** hair."

Why?

- Both "thick" and "curly" are _____ adjectives.
- Since they are in the same category, that makes them _____ adjectives, so put a comma or the word "and" in between them.
- They come before _____ in the hierarchy, so they are written first.
- IMPORTANT: Opinion and color adjectives are _____ adjectives, so there is *no* comma between them.

Let's try another example. This time we will use two **coordinate** adjectives and two **cumulative** adjectives.

Question: How would you describe a little girl's dress with the adjectives "flowered, dainty, new, pretty"?

TRY IT: She wore a _____ _____ _____ _____ dress.

First, identify the adjectives in the cumulative list:

Flowered = _____

Dainty = _____

New = _____

Pretty = _____

We know that the two **coordinate** adjectives can go in any order as long as we put a **comma** or "**and**" between them. There are no commas between all of the **cumulative** adjective categories.

Answer: It could be written any of the following ways:

“She wore a dainty, pretty new flowered dress.” (opinion/opinion – age – pattern)

“She wore a pretty, dainty new flowered dress.”

“She wore a pretty and dainty new flowered dress.”

QUIZ:

Which are cumulative and coordinate adjectives (or both)?

1. Shiny / sparkly = _____
2. Gigantic / twenty-foot = _____
3. Yellow / checkered = _____
4. Angry / mean / old = _____
5. Spherical / spinning = _____
6. Editor / wise = _____

Exceptions:

Every so often, you will come across exceptions.

- They tore down the big old ugly barn.
(size – age – opinion = wrong order)
- I bought four deep blue oval bowls.
(quantity – color – shape = wrong order)

Sometimes our ears “hear” the adjectives in a specific way, so it’s fine to write them as they are commonly spoken.

Test Your Knowledge:

Edit these sentences to have the correct adjective order and punctuation.

1. He bought a little, quaint, log cabin.

2. She had to wash the white, dirty, football, stinky, jersey.

3. The little, British, old lady walked her yippy, curly-haired five puppies every morning.
