

# Comparative and superlative adjectives – article

By Kerry G Maxwell and Lindsay Clandfield

## Introduction

One way of describing a person or thing is by saying that they have more of a particular quality than someone or something else. To do this, we use comparative adjectives, which are formed either by adding -er at the end of the adjective, or placing more before it, e.g:

She's more intelligent than her sister

This is a bigger piece of cake.

It is also possible to describe someone or something by saying that they have more of a particular quality than any other of their kind. We do this by using superlative adjectives, which are formed by adding -est at the end of the adjective and placing the before it, or placing the most before the adjective, e.g.:

He's the most intelligent man I've ever met.

This is the biggest piece of cake

## 1. Some rules about forming comparatives and superlatives

(i) one syllable adjectives generally form the comparative by adding -er and the superlative by adding -est, e.g.:

Adjective	Comparative	Superlative
soft	softer	the softest
cheap	cheaper	the cheapest
sweet	sweeter	the sweetest
thin	thinner	the thinnest

- Note that if a one syllable adjective ends in a single vowel letter followed by a single consonant letter, the consonant letter is doubled, e.g.: thin ? thinner, big ? biggest.
- If an adjective ends in -e, this is removed when adding -er/-est, e.g.: wide ? wider/widest.
- If an adjective ends in a consonant followed by -y, -y is replaced by -i when adding -er/-est, e.g.: dry ? drier/driest.

(ii) more and most are sometimes used with one syllable adjectives as an alternative to the -er/-est form when we particularly want to emphasize the comparison, or if the adjective occurs with another adjective which has more than one syllable, e.g.:

The icing was supposed to be pink and white, but it looked more red than pink.  
 That sofa might look nice, but this one is more soft and comfortable

(iii) two syllable adjectives which end in -y usually form the comparative by adding -er and the superlative by adding -est, (note the change of -y to -i in the comparative/superlative) e.g.:

Adjective	Comparative	Superlative
lucky	luckier	the luckiest
pretty	prettier	the prettiest
tidy	tidier	the tidiest

(iv) two syllable adjectives ending in -ed, -ing, -ful, or -less always form the comparative with more and the superlative with most, e.g.:

Adjective	Comparative	Superlative
worried	more worried	the most worried
boring	more boring	the most boring
careful	more careful	the most careful
useless	more useless	the most useless

As a general rule, most other two syllable adjectives also form comparatives and superlatives with more and most, apart from those ending in -y (see (iii) above). However a few two-syllable adjectives can take either -er/-est or more/most. Here are five of the most common examples:

Adjective	Comparative	Superlative
common	commoner/more common	the commonest/most common
narrow	narrower/more narrow	the narrowest/most narrow
pleasant	pleasanter/more pleasant	the pleasantest/most pleasant
useless	more useless	the most useless
simple	simpler/more simple	the simplest/most simple
quiet	quieter/more quiet	the quietest/most quiet

(v) Adjectives which have three or more syllables always form the comparative and superlative with more and most, e.g.:

Adjective	Comparative	Superlative
dangerous	more dangerous	the most dangerous
difficult	more difficult	the most difficult
exciting	more exciting	the most exciting
ridiculous	more ridiculous	the most ridiculous

The only exceptions are some three syllable adjectives which have been formed by adding the prefix -un to another adjective, especially those formed from an adjective ending in -y. These adjectives can form comparatives and superlatives by using more/most or adding -er/-est, e.g.:

Adjective	Comparative	Superlative
unhappy	unhappier	the unhappiest/most unhappy
unfriendly	unfriendlier	the unfriendliest/most unfriendly

(vi) The following adjectives have irregular comparative and superlative forms:

Adjective	Comparative	Superlative
good	better	the best
bad	worse	the worst
far	farther/further	the farthest/furthest

The adjectives ill and well, describing bad and good health, have irregular comparative forms. The comparative of ill is worse, and the comparative of well is better, e.g.: She's feeling much better/worse today.

The usual comparative and superlative forms of the adjective old are older and oldest. However the alternative forms elder and eldest are sometimes used. Elder and eldest are generally restricted to talking about the age of people, especially people within the same family, and are not used to talk about the age of things, e.g.:

It's the oldest/\*eldest castle in Britain.

Elder cannot occur in the predicative position after link verbs such as be, become, get etc., e.g.:

We're all getting older/\*elder.

My brother is older/\*elder than me.

(vii) Comparatives and superlatives of compound adjectives are generally formed by using more and most, e.g.:

Going skiing was the most nerve-wracking experience I've had.

Some compound adjectives have a first element consisting of an adjective which would normally form a comparative or superlative in one word, either by adding -er/-est, or by an irregular form. Such compound adjectives can therefore form a comparative/superlative by using these changes to the first adjective, rather than by using more/most, e.g.:

Adjective	Comparative	Superlative
good-looking	better-looking	the best-looking
long-lasting	longer-lasting	the longest-lasting
low-paid	lower-paid	the lowest-paid

(viii) Some adjectives which already have a comparative or superlative meaning do not usually occur with -er/-est or more/most, unless we want to give special emphasis, often for humorous effect, e.g.:

Mussels are my most favourite food.

Common examples of adjectives like these are: complete, equal, favourite, and perfect.

## 2. Use of comparatives

Just like other adjectives, comparatives can be placed before nouns in the attributive position, e.g.:

a more intelligent child

the bigger piece of cake

Comparatives can also occur after be and other link verbs, e.g.:

The street has become quieter since they left.

You should be more sensible

Comparatives are very commonly followed by than and a pronoun or noun group, in order to describe who the other person or thing involved in the comparison is, e.g.:

John is taller than me.

I think that she's more intelligent than her sister.

As well as pronouns and noun groups, than is often followed by other kinds of clause, e.g.:

I think the portions were bigger than they were last time

They had given a better performance than in previous years

Comparatives are often qualified by using words and phrases such as much, a lot, far, a bit/little, slightly etc., e.g.:

You should go by train, it would be much cheaper.

Could you be a bit quieter?

I'm feeling a lot better.

Do you have one that's slightly bigger?

Two comparatives can be contrasted by placing *the* before them, indicating that a change in one quality is linked to a change in another, e.g.:

The smaller the gift, the easier it is to send.

The more stressed you are, the worse it is for your health.

Two comparatives can also be linked with *and* to show a continuing increase in a particular quality, e.g.:

The sea was getting rougher and rougher.

Her illness was becoming worse and worse.

### **3. Use of superlatives**

Like comparatives, superlatives can be placed before nouns in the attributive position, or occur after *be* and other link verbs, e.g.:

the most delicious chocolate cake I've ever eaten

Annabel was the youngest

This restaurant is the best

As shown in the second two examples, superlatives are often used on their own if it is clear what or who is being compared. If you want to be specific about what you are comparing, you can do this with a noun, or a phrase beginning with *in* or *of*, e.g.:

Annabel was the youngest child

Annabel was the youngest of the children

This restaurant is the best in town.

Another way of being specific is by placing a relative clause after the superlative, e.g.:

This offer is the best I'm going to get.

Note that if the superlative occurs before the noun, in the attributive position, the *in* or *of* phrase or relative clause comes after the noun, cf:

The best restaurant in town.

The best offer I'm going to get.

Although the usually occurs before a superlative, it is sometimes left out in informal speech or writing, e.g.:

This one seems to be cheapest.

However the cannot be left out when the superlative is followed by an of/in phrase, or a relative clause indicating the group of people or things being compared, e.g.:

This one is the cheapest.

This one is cheapest.

This one is the cheapest of the new designs.

\* This one is cheapest of the new designs.

Sometimes possessive pronouns are used instead of the before a superlative, e.g.:

my youngest brother

her most valuable piece of jewellery

Ordinal numbers are often used with superlatives to indicate that something has more of a particular quality than most others of its kind, e.g.:

It's the third largest city in the country.

The cathedral is the second most popular tourist attraction

In informal conversation, superlatives are often used instead of comparatives when comparing two things. For example, when comparing a train journey and car journey to Edinburgh, someone might say: The train is quickest, rather than: The train is quicker. Superlatives are not generally used in this way in formal speech and writing.

## **4. The opposites of comparative and superlative forms**

Comparative and superlative forms with -er/-est and more/most are always used to talk about a quality which is greater in amount relative to others. If we want to talk about a quality which is smaller in amount relative to others, we use the forms less (the opposite of comparative more), and the least (the opposite of superlative the most). Less is used to indicate that something or someone does not have as much of a particular quality as someone or something else, e.g.:

This sofa is less comfortable.

I've always been less patient than my sister.

The least is used to indicate that something or someone has less of a quality than any other person or thing of its kind, e.g.:

It's the least expensive way to travel.