

## Gradable and non-gradable adjectives 1

A

*Gradable adjectives* can be used with *grading adverbs* such as **very** or **extremely** to say that a thing or person has more or less of a particular quality. Here are some examples of adjectives used as gradable in their most common meanings:

Grading  
adverbs

a bit, dreadfully, extremely,  
hugely, immensely, intensely,  
rather, reasonably, slightly, very

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angry, big, busy, clever, common,  
different, fast, friendly, happy,  
important, low, popular, quiet,  
rich, strong, weak, young

Gradable  
adjectives

- She was *extremely* rich.  
 It's *hugely* popular.

- The people there are *reasonably* friendly.  
 They're *slightly* different.

*Non-gradable adjectives* are not used with adverbs such as **very** or **extremely** because these adjectives do not refer to qualities which have different degrees. With non-gradable adjectives we can use *non-grading adverbs* which emphasise their extreme or absolute nature, such as **absolutely**, **completely**, etc. Many classifying adjectives (see Unit 66) are usually non-gradable. Adverbs such as **almost**, **exclusively**, etc., which indicate the extent of the quality, are commonly used with classifying adjectives. Here are some examples of non-gradable adjectives in their most common meanings:

Non-  
grading  
adverbs

absolutely, completely, entirely,  
perfectly, practically, simply,  
totally, utterly, virtually;  
almost, exclusively, fully,  
largely, mainly, nearly, primarily

+

awful, excellent, huge,  
impossible, superb, terrible,  
unique, unknown, wrong;  
domestic, environmental,  
agricultural (see Unit 66C)

Non-  
gradable  
adjectives

- She's *completely* wrong.  
 He was *practically* unknown to the public.

- It was *absolutely* superb.  
 The region is *largely* agricultural.

Gradable adjectives are sometimes used with non-grading adverbs, and non-gradable adjectives with grading adverbs to give special emphasis or to be humorous:

- What you're asking isn't just difficult – it's *extremely* impossible! (*grading adverb* + *non-gradable adjective*)  
 You've won a hundred pounds? Wow, you're *virtually* rich! (*non-grading adverb* + *gradable adjective*)

Note that not all the adverbs can go with all the adjectives given in each of the tables above. For example, we can say 'absolutely huge', but we wouldn't usually say 'completely huge' unless it was for particular emphasis or for humour.

B

The adverbs **fairly** (= to quite a large degree, but usually less than 'very'), **really** (= 'very [much]') and **pretty** (= similar to 'fairly'; used in informal contexts) are commonly used with both gradable and non-gradable adjectives:

- She's *fairly* popular at school.  It was a *fairly* awful film.  
 I'm *really* busy at the moment.  The flooding was *really* terrible.  
 It's a *pretty* important exam.  The bill was *pretty* huge.

However, note that we don't generally use **fairly** (or **very**) with gradable adjectives which indicate that something is very good or necessary:

- Experience is *really* / *pretty* essential for the job. (*not* ... fairly essential ...)  
 The weather was *really* / *pretty* perfect. (*not* ... fairly perfect.)

Also: invaluable, superb, tremendous, wonderful

## Exercises

67.1 Complete the four sentences which contain gradable adjectives using *very*. Complete the remaining sentences with the adverbs from the box. Try to use a different one each time. **A**

absolutely almost completely exclusively mainly practically

- 1 The bridge is now ..... complete.
- 2 The material is ..... cotton.
- 3 The food was ..... excellent.
- 4 Her explanation was ..... clear.
- 5 Their actions were ..... illegal.
- 6 The new restaurant is ..... popular.
- 7 I was in a / an ..... permanent state of suspense.
- 8 I thought she was ..... attractive.
- 9 Until last year the club was ..... male.
- 10 Small black cars are not ..... visible.

67.2 Answer the questions using an adverb + adjective. **A** How would you feel if ...

- 1 ... a friend said s/he had just won a million pounds? *I'd be absolutely delighted.*
- 2 ... your best friend told you s/he was emigrating to Australia?
- 3 ... someone broke a window in your house or flat?
- 4 ... a complete stranger told you that you were very beautiful / handsome?
- 5 ... you lost some airline tickets you had just bought?

67.3 If necessary, correct the italicised parts of this email. If they are already correct, write ✓. **A**

Dear Nathan,

I'm writing this email in my new flat in Stratford. It's in an (1) *absolutely old* building which was (2) *totally renovated* last year. Fortunately, I didn't have to do much decorating when I moved in. As you know, I'm (3) *hugely useless* at DIY so I was (4) *absolutely happy* about that. The building is (5) *reasonably unique* in this part of Stratford, as most others around are (6) *rather modern*, and the view across the river from my sitting room is (7) *simply superb*. The flat's (8) *simply small*, but (9) *completely comfortable* for me.

My neighbours are (10) *very friendly* and usually (11) *fully quiet*. The only problem is that the woman upstairs plays the trumpet and I find it (12) *a bit impossible* to read when she's playing. I get (13) *slightly angry* about this, but she doesn't play for long each time, so it's not an (14) *extremely terrible* problem.

I know that the weather has been (15) *dreadfully awful* recently, so it's been difficult for you to get here, but you must come over one evening. There's an (16) *absolutely marvellous* restaurant nearby that we could go to.

Hope all is well,

Lea

67.4 Cross out any incorrect or unlikely alternatives. **B**

- 1 Her advice was *fairly* / *really* invaluable.
- 2 Our neighbours are *really* / *fairly* friendly.
- 3 I thought his performance as Hamlet was *fairly* / *really* tremendous.
- 4 The children kept *pretty* / *very* quiet during the concert.
- 5 The view from the window was *very* / *pretty* wonderful.
- 6 Their cooperation is *pretty* / *very* essential if we want the project to go ahead.
- 7 The weather was *really* / *fairly* perfect for a long walk.
- 8 In this photograph she looked *really* / *very* young.
- 9 The workmanship in the furniture was *pretty* / *very* superb.
- 10 The disease is *fairly* / *pretty* common in this part of the country.