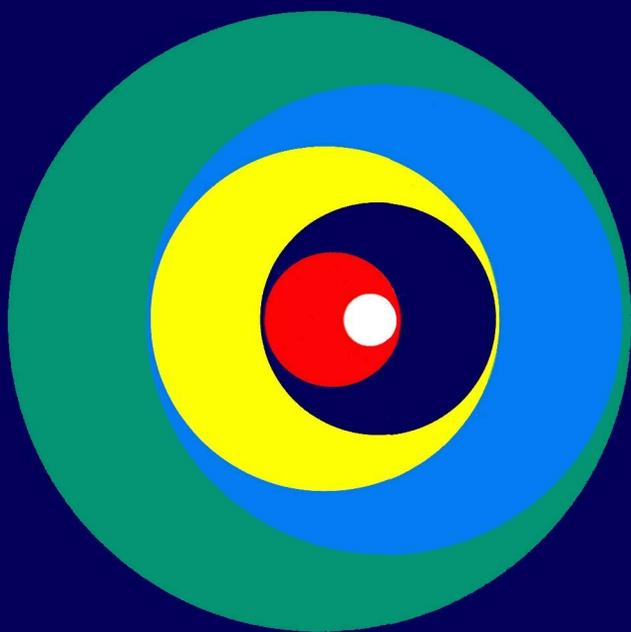


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OXFORD
GUIDE TO
ENGLISH
GRAMMAR



26

Comparison

217 Summary

The comparative and superlative of adjectives • 218

Adjectives can have a comparative form (*newer, more modern*), and a superlative form (*newest, most modern*). Short adjectives take *er/est*, and long ones take *more/most*.

The comparative and superlative of adverbs • 219

Adverbs can have a comparative form (*faster, more rapidly*) and a superlative form (*fastest, most rapidly*).

More, most, less, least, fewer and fewest • 220

We can use *more, most, less* etc to compare quantities.

*There's **more** traffic on a weekday.*

Patterns expressing a comparison • 221

We use these patterns to make comparisons.

*The new system is **more** complicated **than** the old one.*

*Nothing is ever **as** simple **as** it seems.*

*Greenland is the largest island **in** the world.*

*It was the **most** embarrassing thing **that** ever happened to me.*

Special patterns with the comparative • 222

And we can use these special patterns.

*The people in the queue were getting **more and more impatient**.*

*The longer people have to wait, **the more impatient** they get.*

218 The comparative and superlative of adjectives

GOLD AND COPPER

*Gold is much **softer** than copper, so it is **easier** to hammer into shape. It is not very strong. A gold knife might look very fine but would not have been much use for skinning a bear, so from early times gold became the metal for ornaments. Copper is much **harder**; it would have been much **more difficult** for early man to shape, but the finished article was **more durable**.*

(from L. Aitchison *The Story of Metals*)

MIDTOWN MANHATTAN

*Midtown Manhattan, which ranges roughly from 34th to 59th Streets and river to river, is a center of superlatives. The **biggest** buildings, **best** restaurants, **most** art galleries, **brightest** lights, **greatest** concentration of big business, **largest** complex of theaters and concert houses, **best** bargain basements, **most exclusive** couture houses, and the **most** specialized services are all here.*

(from *Fodor's Budget Travel in America*)

1 Use

We use these forms to compare the same quality of different things.

*Gold is **softer** than copper.*

*Copper is **more durable**.*

*New York is the **biggest** city in the USA.*

*The **most exclusive** fashion stores are here.*

We can compare, for example, the softness of gold and copper, or the size of New York compared to other cities.

NOTE

a For patterns such as *softer **than** copper, the biggest **in** the USA*, • 221.

b The traditional rule is that we use a comparative (*softer, more durable*) for two items, and we use the superlative (*biggest, most exclusive*) for more than two. But in informal English we often use the superlative to refer to one of only two items.

*Which of **these two photos** is better/**best**?*

2 Form

a These are the regular forms.

		Comparative	Superlative
Short adjective	<i>soft</i>	<i>softer</i>	<i>softest</i>
Long adjective	<i>exclusive</i>	<i>more exclusive</i>	<i>most exclusive</i>

Short adjectives take *er/est*, and long adjectives take *more/most*. For rules about which adjectives count as short and which as long, • (4).

NOTE

a There are some spelling rules for *er/est*.

No doubling of *e*: *fine finer* • 292(2)

Doubling of some consonants: *hot hottest* • 293

Y changing to *i*: *heavy heavier* • 294

b For *less soft, least exclusive*, • 221(2).

c In rather formal English *most* can mean 'very'. Compare *the most* and *a most*.

Superlative: *It's **the most exclusive** store in New York.*

Degree: *It's **a most exclusive** store.* (= very exclusive)

d When we compare two qualities, we use *more*, not *er*.

*I was **more sad than** angry.*

Here are two other ways of saying the same thing.

*I was **not so much** angry **as** sad.*

*I was sad **rather than** angry.*

- b There are a few irregular forms.

	Comparative	Superlative
<i>good</i>	<i>better</i>	<i>best</i>
<i>bad</i>	<i>worse</i>	<i>worst</i>
<i>far</i>	<i>farther/further</i>	<i>farthest/furthest</i>

*The **best** restaurants are in Manhattan.*

*The weather is getting **worse**.*

NOTE

a The adjectives *well* (= in good health) and *ill* take these irregular forms.

*Feel a lot **better** now. She looks **worse** today.*

b For *farther/further* and *elder/eldest*, • (5).

3 Position

A comparative or superlative adjective can come in the same position as other adjectives.

Attributive: *a **softer** metal* *the **most** specialized services*

Predicative: *Gold is **softer**.* *Which building is **tallest**?*

We usually put *the* before a superlative adjective.

*Jupiter is **the** biggest planet.*

Jupiter is (the) biggest.

4 Long and short adjectives

In general, short adjectives take *er/est* while long ones take *more/most*. One-syllable adjectives count as short and three-syllable adjectives count as long. Most two-syllable adjectives count as long but not all of them.

- a One-syllable adjectives (e.g. *soft, tall*)

These take *er/est* (*softer, softest*). Exceptions are adjectives in *ed* (e.g. *pleased, bored*) and the adjectives *real, right* and *wrong*.

*The film made the story seem **more real**.*

Some one-syllable adjectives of abstract meaning take either *er/est* or *more/most*, e.g. *clear, free, keen, safe, sure, true, wise*.

*I wish I felt **surer/more sure** about what I'm doing.*

- b Two-syllable adjectives (e.g. *useful, happy*)

The following take *more/most* (**more** *useful*, **most** *useful*).

Ending in *ful*: *careful, helpful, hopeful, peaceful, useful*, etc

Ending in *less*: *helpless, useless*, etc

Ending in *ing*: *boring, pleasing, tiring, willing*, etc

Ending in *ed*: *amused, annoyed, ashamed, confused, surprised*, etc

Some others: *afraid, cautious, certain, correct, eager, exact, famous, foolish, formal, frequent, mature, modern, normal, recent*

The following take either *er/est* or *more/most*: *able, common, cruel, feeble, gentle, handsome, narrow, pleasant, polite, simple, sincere, stupid, tired*.

Two-syllable adjectives ending in *y* usually take *er/est* (*happier, happiest*), although *more/most* is possible. Some examples: *dirty, easy, empty, funny, happy, heavy, hungry, lovely, lucky, pretty, silly, thirsty, tidy*.

NOTE

Happy etc can still take *er/est*, even with a negative prefix: *unhappier, untidiest*.

Also: *unpleasantest/most unpleasant*.

- c Adjectives of three or more syllables (e.g. *difficult, magnificent*)

These always take *more/most* (**more** *difficult*, **most** *difficult*).

- d Overview

Always <i>er/est</i> :	Most of one-syllable, e.g. <i>small</i>
Usually <i>er/est</i> :	Two syllables ending in <i>y</i> , e.g. <i>lucky</i>
Either <i>er/est</i>	Some of one syllable, e.g. <i>clear, true</i>
or <i>more/most</i> :	Some of two syllables, e.g. <i>narrow, common</i>
Always <i>more/most</i> :	One syllable ending in <i>ed</i> , e.g. <i>pleased</i>
	Most of two syllables, e.g. <i>careful, boring</i>
	Three or more syllables, e.g. <i>expensive, magnificent</i>

5 Some special forms

- a *Farther/further* and *farthest/furthest*

These words express distance. We use them as adjectives and adverbs.

*The **farthest/furthest** moon is 13 million kilometres from Saturn.*

*I can't walk any **farther/further**.*

Further (but not *farther*) can express quantity.

*Let's hope there are no **further** problems.* (= no more problems)

- b *Older/elder* and *oldest/eldest*

We use *elder* and *eldest* mainly to talk about ages in a family. They go before the noun.

*Have you got an **older/elder** brother?*

*The **oldest/eldest** daughter married a pop singer.*

- c *Latest* and *last*

Latest means 'furthest ahead in time' or 'newest'.

*What's the **latest** time we can leave and still catch the train?*

*This jacket is the **latest** fashion.*

Last means 'before' or 'final'.

*I had my hair cut **last** week.*

*This is the **last** time I lend anyone my car.*

- d *Nearest* and *next*

Nearest means the shortest distance away. *Next* refers to one of a sequence of things coming one after the other.

*Where is the **nearest** phone box?* (= closest, least far)

*We have to get out at the **next** stop.* (= the stop after this)

219 The comparative and superlative of adverbs

- 1 Some adverbs have the same form as adjectives, • 207(3-5). They take *er/est*.
*You'll have to work **harder** if you want to pass the exam.*
*Let's see who can shoot the **straightest**.*
*Tim got to work a few minutes **earlier** than usual.*

NOTE

Soon also takes *er/est*.

*If we all help, we'll get the job finished **sooner**.*

- 2 There are a few irregular forms.

	Comparative	Superlative
<i>well</i>	<i>better</i>	<i>best</i>
<i>badly</i>	<i>worse</i>	<i>worst</i>
<i>far</i>	<i>farther/further</i>	<i>farthest/furthest</i>

*I find these pills work **best**.*

*My tooth was aching **worse** than ever.*

NOTE For comparison with *far*, • 218(5a).

- 3 Other adverbs take *more/most*. This includes almost all adverbs in *ly*.
*You'll have to draw the graph **more accurately** than that.*
*The first speaker presented his case the **most convincingly**.*
*I wish we could meet **more often**.*

NOTE

Some adverbs can be with or without *ly*. • 207(4)

*I got the bike fairly **cheap/cheaply**.*

Such adverbs have two different comparative and superlative forms.

*You could get one **cheaper/more cheaply** secondhand.*

220 *More, most, less, least, fewer and fewest*

We can use these words to compare quantities.

Plural

more (= a larger number)

*You've got **more** cassettes than me.*

most (= the largest number)

*You've got the **most** cassettes of anyone I know.*

fewer (= a smaller number) • Note

*I buy **fewer** cassettes these days.*

fewest (= the smallest number) • Note

*You've got the **fewest** cassettes of anyone I know.*

Uncountable

more (= a larger amount)

*They play **more** music at weekends.*

most (= the largest amount)

*This station plays the **most** music.*

less (= a smaller amount)

*There's **less** music on the radio at weekends.*

least (= the smallest amount)

*This station plays the **least** music.*

NOTE

The rule is that we use *fewer/fewest* with a plural noun.

*There are **fewer cars** on the road in winter.*

But *less/least* with a plural noun is common, especially in informal speech.

*There are **less cars** on the road in winter.*

It is safer for the learner to avoid this usage.

221 Patterns expressing a comparison

MOTELS IN THE USA

*Many motels are every bit **as** elegant, comfortable, and well-equipped **as** the most modern hotels. Many have bars, fine restaurants and coffee shops for casual meals and breakfast. If the motel does not have a restaurant, there are always restaurants nearby. Most rooms are furnished with television. Even **less** expensive motels often have a swimming pool. The price for rooms in motels is usually slightly **less than** for hotels.*

(from USA Travel Information)

1 More, as and less

We can say that something is greater than, equal to or less than something else.

*Most hotels are **more** comfortable than motels.*

*Some motels are **as** comfortable as hotels.*

*Some motels are **less** comfortable than a modern hotel.*

NOTE

We can make comparisons with *same, like, similar* and *different*.

*Motels are **the same** as hotels. Motels are **like** hotels.*

*Motels are **similar** to hotels. Motels are not very **different** from hotels.*

The following words can also express a comparison.

*Paris is my **favourite** city. (= I like it best.)*

*Wood is **superior** to **preferable** to plastic as a material. (= better)*

*The car's speed **exceeded** ninety miles an hour. (= was more than)*

2 Less and least

- a *Less and least* are the opposites of *more* and *most*.

*Motels are usually **less** expensive than hotels.*

*A motel will cost you **less**.*

*The subway is the **least** expensive way to get around New York.*

*We go out **less** often these days.*

NOTE

We use *less* with both long and short adjectives.

*It's cheaper/**less expensive**. It's more expensive/**less cheap**.*

- b Whether we say, for example, *warmer* or *less cold* depends on our point of view.

*It was cold in the house, but it was **less cold** than outside.*

We choose *less cold* here because we are talking about how cold the house was, not how warm it was. We can express the same thing using a negative sentence with *as*.

*It was cold, but it wasn't **as** cold as outside.*

In informal English this pattern is more usual. *Less* + adjective can be a little formal.

3 As and so

- a We use a positive statement with *as* to say that things are equal.

Many motels are as comfortable as hotels.

My sister is as tall as me.

NOTE

- a We can use *as* in idiomatic phrases.

as hard as iron (= very hard) *as light as a feather* (= very light)

- b Note this use with numbers and measurements.

The temperature is often as high as 40 degrees.

(= The temperature is often 40 degrees, which is very high.)

- b In a negative statement we can use either *as* or *so*.

. Some motels are not as comfortable/not so comfortable as a good hotel.

The place isn't as crowded/isn't so crowded in winter.

I don't drink as much/so much coffee as you do.

Not as/so comfortable means 'less comfortable'.

- c In attributive position, *as* + adjective goes before *a/an*.

This isn't as comfortable a hotel as the last one we stayed in.

Such replaces *so* in a phrase with *a/an*.

This isn't such a comfortable hotel as the last one we stayed in.

- d We use *as* (not *so*) with the second item in the comparison. After *as* we can use a phrase or clause.

Copper isn't as valuable as gold.

I came as quickly as I could.

No one scored as many points as Laura did.

4 Than

After a comparative we can use *than* with a phrase or clause.

Gold is softer than copper, NOT *Gold is softer as copper*.

Going out alone is more difficult for women than for men.

The motel was less expensive than I had expected.

Flying is a lot quicker than going by train.

There were more people in town than usual.

5 Pronouns after *as* and *than*

A pronoun directly after *as* or *than* has the object form unless there is a verb after it.

I'm not as tall as him/as tall as he is.

The other teams played better than us/better than we did.

NOTE *I'm not as tall as he* is formal and old-fashioned.

6 Comparisons without *as* or *than*

We can leave out *as/than* + phrase or clause if the meaning is clear without it.

I liked the last hotel we stayed in. This one isn't so comfortable.

Gold isn't very suitable for making tools. Copper is much harder.

It's more difficult to find your way in the dark.

7 Patterns with the superlative

After a superlative we often use a phrase of time or place, an of-phrase or a relative clause.

*It's going to be the most exciting pop festival **ever**.*

*Which is the tallest building **in the world**?*

*Titan is the largest satellite **of all**.*

*It's the most marvellous painting **I've ever seen**.*

*Peter is the least aggressive person **I know**.*

NOTE

a An of-phrase can come in front position for emphasis.

***Of all Saturn's moons**, Titan is the largest.*

b We sometimes use a pattern with *one of/some of*.

*This building is **one of the** tallest in the world.*

8 Much bigger etc

We can use an adverb of degree in patterns expressing a comparison.

*Gold is **much** softer than copper.* • 212(2)

*This is **by far** the best method.* • 212(3)

*Many motels are **every bit as/just as** elegant as the most modern hotels.*

*I'll need **a lot** more paper.* • 212(8f)

222 Special patterns with the comparative

1 We use this pattern with *and* to express a continuing increase.

*The plant grew **taller and taller**.*

*The roads are getting **more and more crowded**.*

*There's **more and more** traffic all the time.*

*The problem is becoming **worse and worse**.*

2 We use this pattern with *the* and a comparative to say that a change in one thing goes with a change in another.

***The longer** the journey (is), **the more expensive** the ticket (is).*

***The further** you travel, **the more** you pay.*

***The older** you get, **the more difficult** it becomes to find a job.*