

ADJECTIVES SHIFTED OUT OF ORDER

Adjectives, parts of speech, modifiers, comma use, parenthetical phrases, word usage, writer's technique

The **blue** water, **clear** and **sparkling**, beckoned the athletic swimmers.

The **stony** mountain, **lofty** and **forbidding**, stood before us.

The **old** house, **decayed** and **abandoned**, surrendered to the fire.

The **shrewd** businessman, **calculating** but **optimistic**, considered the opportunity.

Adjectives are words that describe nouns. Does the word “dog” create a picture in your mind? (“dog” is a noun). What if you read “a big, ferocious, black dog”? Does that change (modify) the picture in your mind? “Big” is an adjective. So is “ferocious”. “Black” is an adjective too.

Here are some more adjectives:

Ferocious, timid, beautiful, silent, ordinary, careful, outrageous, intelligent, educated, courageous

Adjectives can be put in many places in a sentence:

The red bird perched on the branch.

The bird on the branch was red.

You can string adjectives together before a noun, but lots of people get confused about when to separate them with commas.^{1[1]}

Two small black shapes moved toward the sleeping infant.

He was a loving, warm, gentle man.

In English adjectives usually come before the noun they modify (Crafty George handed me the contract.) – unless they come after the correct form of the verb “to be”. (George was crafty). Shifting the adjectives out of order is a writer’s technique to add more images to a sentence while adding a professional rhythm – without confusing comma exceptions. (George, crafty and calculating, handed me the contract.)

Use adjectives shifted out of order to add more interesting images to the following sentences. You can put one adjective in front of the noun.

Time seemed to drag.

Dreary time, endless and empty, seemed to drag.

The man took my money.

The sun rose in the eastern sky.

She rested her hands on the book.

Dust covered the window.

^{1[1]} The first example should not be separated with commas. The second needs commas. Here’s how you can know what to do. If you can’t meaningfully put “ands” between the adjectives (“Two and small and black shapes?”), don’t use commas. If you can put the word “and” between the adjectives (“loving and warm and gentle man?”!), you should probably use commas

Practicing Adjectives Shifted Out of Order.

Leaving one adjective in front of a noun and placing two adjectives following it (set off by commas) is a technique used by many fiction writers. Harry Noden in *Image Grammar: Using Grammatical Structures to Teach Writing* calls this technique “Adjectives Shifted out of Order”. Using this technique (sparingly) can add rhythm and music to your sentences while also providing interesting detail and images. The comma rule is very easy.

Sentence: The cat slept by the window.
With adjectives shifted out of order: The old cat, scarred and flea-bitten, slept by the window.

Use “adjectives shifted out of order” to liven up the following simple sentences.

The rains filled the rivers.
The thunderous rains, unceasing and merciless, filled the rivers.

Stars appeared in the sky.
Tiny stars, gentle and winkling, appeared in the sky.

Her voice called out to me.

Silence filled the room.

His eyes stared through me.

The trees swayed in the wind.

A situation confronted us.

The moon floated over the moors.

Sunlight filled the yard.

Permanently

One day the Nouns were clustered in the street.
An Adjective walked by, with her dark beauty.
The Nouns were struck, moved, changed.
The next day a Verb drove up, and created the Sentence.

Each Sentence says one thing-for example, "Although it was a dark rainy day when the Adjective walked by, I shall remember the pure and sweet expression on her face until the day I perish from the green, effective earth."

Or, "Will you please close the window, Andrew?"

Or, for example, "Thank you, the pink pot of flowers on the window sill has changed color recently to a light yellow, due to the heat from the boiler factory which exists nearby."

In the springtime the Sentences and the Nouns lay silently on the grass.
A lonely Conjunction here and there would call, "And! But!"
But the Adjective did not emerge.

As the adjective is lost in the sentence,
So I am lost in your eyes, ears, nose, and throat--
You have enchanted me with a single kiss
Which can never be undone
Until the destruction of language.

Poem: "Permanently," by Kenneth Koch, from Selected Poems, 1950-1982 (Vintage).