**Superlative Adjectives**

**What is a superlative adjective?**

**Superlative adjectives** are adjectives that describe the attribute of a person or thing that is the highest (or lowest) in degree compared to the members of the noun’s group. Superlative adjectives are similar to [comparative adjectives](http://www.thefreedictionary.com/Comparative-Adjectives.htm), except they express the most extreme degree of comparison, and they are only used when talking about groups of three or more people or things.

**Forming Superlative Adjectives**

We form superlative adjectives either by adding “-est” to the end of the adjective, or by adding the word *most* before the adjective.

Although there are some exceptions, we can follow some simple general rules for forming superlative adjectives.

**“Short” Adjectives**

With one-syllable adjectives, we add “-est” and double the final consonant if preceded by one vowel. For example:

* big – **big*gest***
* thin – **thin*nest***
* sad – **sad*dest***
* slim – **slim*mest***

The final consonant is **not** doubled if it is preceded by two vowels or another consonant, as in:

* weak – **wea*kest***
* strong – **stro*ngest***
* large – **la*rgest***
* small – **sma*llest***

(If the adjective ends in an “e,” then you only need to add “-st,” as in the case of *large – large****st***.)

If an adjective has two syllables and ends in “-y,” we replace “y” with “i” and add “-est,” as in:

* happy – **happ*iest***
* chewy – **chew*iest***
* sticky – **stick*iest***
* furry – **furr*iest***

**“Long” Adjectives**

**“Long” adjectives** are adjectives that have three or more syllables, or adjectives that have two syllables and *do not* end in “-y.” Rather than changing the ending of long adjectives to make them superlative, we use the word *most* before the adjective to indicate the highest degree of something, or *least* to indicate the lowest degree. For example:

* careful – **most/least careful**
* caring – **most/least caring**
* gifted – **most/least gifted**
* intelligent – **most/least intelligent**
* beautiful – **most/least beautiful**
* amazing – **most/least amazing**

**Exceptions**

As with most grammatical “rules” in English, there are some exceptions to the patterns above. Here are a few of the adjectives that have **irregular** superlative forms:

* fun – **most/least fun**
* bad – **worst**
* good – **best**
* far – **farthest/furthest**\*

\*When referring to distance, *farthest* and *furthest* can be used interchangeably. However, in the American English, *farthest* is preferred when comparing physical distances, while *furthest* is preferred when comparing figurative distances. For example:

* “San Francisco is farther from New York than Boston, but Hawaii is **the farthest**.” (physical distance)

BUT

* “Of all the lies I’ve heard today, that one is **the furthest** from the truth.” (figurative distance)

In British English, *furthest* is more common both for physical *and* figurative distances.

**Adjectives with multiple superlative forms**

There are also some adjectives that can either take the “-est” ending or be preceded by “most” to become superlative. The following are some of the most common:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Adjective** | **Superlative Form 1** | **Superlative Form 2** |
| clever | cleverest | most/least clever |
| likely | likeliest | most/least likely |
| narrow | narrowest | most/least narrow |
| quiet | quietest | most/least quiet |
| simple | simplest | most/least simple |

**Using Superlative Adjectives**

We usually use superlative adjectives when comparing the attributes of someone or something to others, either in a collective group or among several individuals.

When we use a superlative adjective in a sentence, we almost always precede it with the word *the*. For example:

* “John is **the tallest** student in his class.”
* “Daniel always buys **the most advanced** smartphones available.”
* “Mrs. Phillips is **the nicest** teacher among the staff.”
* “It is **the highest** mountain in the world.”
* “There are many expensive brands of watches, but these are **the most expensive** kind.”
* “This is **the best** book I’ve ever read.”
* “Among her four sisters, Georgina has **the worst** eyesight.”

We can also identify a superlative attribute of a person or thing compared to him-/her-/itself in other points in time. In this case, we generally do **not** use the word *the*. For example:

* “I am **most alert** after my morning coffee.” (compared to a different time of day)
* “The car is **fastest** when the engine has warmed up.” (compared to when the engine is cold)
* “Flowers are **prettiest** in the spring.” (compared to the other seasons)

**Omitting the group of comparison**

When we use superlatives, it is very common to omit the group that something or someone is being compared to because that group is often implied by a previous sentence, and to repeat the group would sound very repetitive. For example:

* “My brothers are all fast swimmers. John is **the fastest**, though.”

In informal speech or writing, it is quite common for the word *the* to be left out when the group of comparison is omitted, as in:

* “We all were carrying big, heavy sticks with us. Mine was **biggest**, though.”

However, this should be avoided, especially in formal or professional speech or writing.

**Superlatives for hyperbole**

We can also omit a group of comparison when a superlative adjective is being used for hyperbolic effect. For instance:

* “I’m going to buy my daughter **the most beautiful** puppy for her birthday.”
* “I had **the biggest** steak for my lunch today.”

**Expressing the lowest degree**

As we’ve seen, “long” adjectives can either take *most* or *least* to indicate the highest and lowest degrees of comparison. For example:

* “Though it was **the least intelligent** movie that I’ve seen this year, it was **the most exciting** one I’d been to in a long time.”

“Short” adjectives, on the other hand, have only one superlative form that expresses the highest degree of its characteristic. For two-syllable adjectives ending in “-y,” we can generally just use the word *least* with the base form of the adjective. For example:

* “He’s **the least tidy** child I’ve ever met.”
* “The baby’s **least grumpy** when he’s had enough naps.”

We can also technically use *the least* with a single-syllable adjective in its normal form to express the lowest degree, but this is often awkward to read or say. For example:

* “John is **the tallest** student in his class, but he is **the least tall** on the baseball team.”

When we want to express the lowest quality of a single-syllable adjective, it is better just to use the opposite superlative adjective, as in:

“John is **the tallest** in his class, but he is **the shortest** on the baseball team.”