Adjectives describe a quality that something has. Some qualities can vary in intensity or ‘grade’ while others can’t.

For example, the adjective ‘cold’ has different variations – you can be ‘very cold’ or ‘a little cold’. The adjective ‘cold’ is gradable.

Other qualities cannot vary in intensity or grade. These adjectives show extreme, absolute or classifying quality. For example, you can’t be ‘very freezing’, ‘a bit boiling’ or ‘very married’.

Thus, adjectives in English can be gradable or non-gradable.

Gradable adjectives

Some adjectives can be made stronger or weaker. They are gradable adjectives.

- These photographs are very good.
- It’s a bit cold in here. Shall I turn the fire on?
1. To show that a person or thing has more or less of a particular quality, we use grading adverbs like ‘very’, ‘pretty’, ‘rather’, ‘slightly’, ‘fairly’, ‘really’, ‘extremely’, etc. before them:

- This cake is very tasty.
- That movie was really interesting.
- Mary is extremely tired.

2. A gradable adjective can also have comparative and superlative forms:

- My neighbor’s house is bigger than mine.
- My parents’ house is the biggest house on the street.

Non-gradable adjectives

Some adjectives describe qualities that are completely present or completely absent. They can’t be stronger or weaker. They are non-gradable adjectives.

- The dinner was fantastic.
- The dog was dead.


- It was very fantastic.
- It was very freezing outside.

For example, ‘freezing’ already means very cold. Think about the meaning of the words:

- It’s freezing outside. (Very cold.)
- That film was terrifying. (Very scary.)
- This meal is delicious. (Very tasty.)
2. Adjectives which identify something as belonging to a particular type, sometimes referred to as **classifying** adjectives, are also non-gradable:

- *It was a military vehicle.* (we can’t say ‘a very military’)
- *He plays a musical instrument.* (we can’t say ‘a bit musical’)

3. Non-gradable adjectives do not normally have comparative and superlative forms:

- *freezing, more freezing, the most freezing*
- *dead, deader, the deadest*
- *nuclear, more nuclear, the most nuclear*

**Note:** Some emphasizing adverbs like ‘**totally**’, ‘**absolutely**’, ‘**completely**’, ‘**perfectly**’, etc. are normally used with adjectives that are in themselves already quite absolute (i.e. non-gradable adjectives). They give even greater **emphasis** to what is said:

- *The movie was absolutely terrifying.*
- *These exercises are completely impossible!*
- *The dinner at Saturday night was absolutely fantastic.*

### Gradable / non-gradable adjectives

Some adjectives may have more than one meaning or sense. It’s possible for the same adjective to be **gradable** with one sense and **non-gradable** with another sense. For example:

- *She sounded slightly foreign.*
- *He’s advising on foreign policy.*

In the first example, the adjective ‘*foreign*’ is gradable because it refers to a measurable quality, whereas in the second, ‘*foreign*’ is non-gradable because it refers to a particular type (of policy).

Some grading adverbs can also used with both gradable and non-gradable adjectives. For
example, the adverbs ‘really’, ‘fairly’ and ‘pretty’:

- It’s a **really** interesting class. (‘interesting’ is a gradable adjective)
- It’s a **really** fascinating class. (‘fascinating’ is a non-gradable adjective)

Watch this video from Espresso English about extreme (non-gradable) adjectives:

See also:

- Descriptive and Demonstrative Adjectives
- Fact and Opinion Adjectives