

# How to Improve Your Prose: Using Modifiers

## Syntactics=Syntax + Tactics

**W**hat would the world be like without modifiers—adjectives and adverbs? You'd have coffee, but it would never be hot. Do you like your eggs over easy, sunnyside up, or scrambled? It wouldn't matter. And your jeans? They couldn't be baggy or fitted; they'd just be jeans, and not even blue. In addition, no one would jump higher, run faster, or travel farther. A world without modifiers would be one without color or dimension. And that goes for the worlds writers create on the page as well.

Writers use modifiers to color, limit, and enliven their writing. Adjectives answer such questions as how many (five men), which one (the tall building), and what type (germ warfare). Adverbs enable readers to tell when (left today), how (fought bravely), and to what extent (highly difficult). Adjectives and adverbs can also take several different forms—words, phrases, and clauses—to express the same idea. For example:

**WORD:** The corner house is mine.

**PHRASE:** The house on the corner is mine.

**CLAUSE:** The house that is on the corner is mine.

In "The Seventh Man," Haruki Murakami uses the full range of these forms, with a number of special touches. To sharpen some images, for example, he uses compound adjectives, which consist of two or more words connected by a hyphen. He describes the seventh man as having a deep-looking scar, and K. as smiling at the narrator with a big, wide-open grin.

The author also uses coordinate adjectives, two or more related adjectives modifying the same noun and separated by commas. The seventh man has stiff,

bristly patches of white hair, and K. has cold, frozen eyes.

Murakami often adds phrase modifiers to make his picture more complete:

*K. was a frail, skinny little thing, with a pale complexion and a face almost pretty enough to be a girl's.*

Note that the author begins with a pair of coordinate adjectives, then enhances his portrait of K. with a prepositional phrase ("with" and its two objects, "complexion" and "face"). "With" is one of Murakami's favorite prepositions; another is "like," which he uses to create telling similes, as we see in his depiction of the narrator's recurrent nightmares:

*They would come to me now and then, like debt collectors at the door.*

Another gadget in Murakami's toolbox is the participle phrase, which consists of a participle and related words, usually modifying a previous noun or pronoun in the sentence:

*The storm's great "eye" seemed to be up there, fixing its cold stare on all of us below.*

In this image of the typhoon, the author uses the participle (fixing) to provide more specific detail about the eye than we get from the single adjective "great."

For some of his richest descriptions, Murakami uses several types of adverb clauses—subordinate groups of words containing their own subjects and predicates and answering questions that adverbs answer. For example, to show how K. reached out to the narrator, the writer uses an adverb clause of manner:

*And his right arm was stretched out in my direction, as if he were trying to grab my hand and pull me into that other world where he was now.*

Here, an entire clause (the subject is "he," and the predicate is "were trying") tells us the manner in which K. stretched out his arm, another form of simile.

While clauses of manner usually begin with "as if" or "as though," adverb clauses of degree usually begin with "so," which is followed up with "that" and other words to indicate the extent of a condition. Murakami uses this technique to describe the size of the second wave:

*It was so huge that it no longer seemed like a real wave. It was like something from another, faraway world.*

If the writer were limited to one-word modifiers to depict the wave's enormity, he might use such adverbs as "very" or "extremely." But the clause of degree creates a far more evocative picture.

**Exercise:** Complete each of the following sentences using the type of modifier requested.

- The guitarist used \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, sounds to arouse the audience from its boredom. [coordinate adjectives]
- Marty approaches us slowly and tentatively, \_\_\_\_\_. [prepositional phrase]
- Mrs. Oliver reminded the class of the importance of creativity, \_\_\_\_\_. [participle phrase]
- Ted spoke in an odd, new voice, \_\_\_\_\_. [adverb clause of manner]
- My arms felt so tired \_\_\_\_\_. [adverb clause of degree]

—Dan Loose