

## Postpositive Adjectives in English

**POSTPOSITIVE OR POSTNOMINAL ADJECTIVES** are attributive adjectives that come after the nouns they modify, generally because they follow Romance rather than Germanic (or English) syntax. An attributive adjective is an adjective joined directly to a modified noun without a linking verb (such as *city* in *city streets*)

Placing the positive form of an adjective after the noun it modifies is rarely done in English except when you want to achieve an elevated style.

They exist in English largely as a remnant of the Norman French influence during the Middle Ages, and especially in the century following the Norman Conquest. The French influence was most pronounced in the language of law, politics, religion, and heraldry. French phrases were adopted wholesale – syntax and all – and soon passed into the English language unchanged.

Recognizing postpositive adjectives in English is important for determining the correct plural for a compound expression.

To form the plural of these expressions it is generally the noun that is made plural, while the adjective remains unchanged (bodies corporate; conditions precedent; consuls general; courts martial; heirs apparent; notaries public; secretaries general; sums certain, etc.)

At least two common English nouns, *things* and *matters*, often take postpositive adjectives that are ordinarily prepositive. Thus, we say that someone is interested in *things philosophical*, *things forgotten*, or *matters philological*, *matters financial*, *matters military*.

And the adjective *alive* is ALWAYS postpositive. Examples: Despite all of the difficulties, keep your *hopes alive*. If you like to fish, they have a *pool alive* with trout.

Sometimes a writer will attempt to create a prepositive adjectival phrase where properly the phrase would normally and most idiomatically be postpositive. The result is ungainly indeed: "*The complained of summaries* in this case are contained in the government's exhibit." It should read, "The summaries complained of...."

One common situation in which adjectives appear postpositively in English is when they qualify compound indefinite pronouns: *something*, *anyone*, *nobody*, *somewhere*, etc.

We need *someone strong* to lift this heavy box.

Wow! Look at you! Going *anywhere nice* dressed that fashionably?

I sat there all day mostly bored because *nothing important* happened.

Certain adjectives are used fairly commonly in postpositive position. Present and past participles exhibit this behavior:

All *those entering* the amphitheater should take a seat near the front.

One of the *people killed* by the explosion was a friend of mine.

Similar behavior is displayed by many adjectives with the suffix *-able* or *-ible*.  
The best room *available* has already been booked.

That was the worst *choice* **imaginable**.

She made the only *decision* **possible** given the circumstances.

Adjectives may undergo a change of meaning when used postpositively. Consider the following example:

I am here to find the **responsible** people who will work with us until the end.

I am here to find the people **responsible** for this tragic event.

In the first example this is a positive attribute – people able to be trusted or depended upon. In the second example it is the idea of those liable for their actions and answerable to an authority (the police, courts, etc.).

**Special Conditions.** Some noun forms are more prone to post-positive adjectives than others, because they express an added element of power, dominance, or supremacy. Probably the most common occurrence of this is in the phrase "best [noun] possible," though, in advertising you quite often hear "best [noun] available" just as frequently. This is basically a literal translation of the French adjective "deluxe," and quite often you'll see product names that have the word "deluxe" in them to create this elite effect.

Advertisers are prone to **hyperbole** (an exaggeration used as a figure of speech), but you can substitute "best" and the post-positive adjective with superlatives and adjectives ("the lowest prices imaginable"). The same elite attitude advertisers try to encourage is expressed in traditional arenas of power and class, especially if it involves lineage or political and military positions.

**Archaic and poetic usage.** Phrases with postpositive adjectives are sometimes used with archaic effect, as in *dreams believed*. Phrases which reverse the normal word order are quite common in poetry, usually to fit the meter or rhyme, as with "fiddlers three" (from *Old King Cole*) or "forest primeval" (from *Evangeline*), though word order was less important in Early Modern English and earlier forms of English. Similar examples exist for possessive adjectives, as in "O Mistress Mine" (a song in Act II, Scene 3 of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*).

**Heraldry.** In *heraldry*, the most important aspects are listed first, followed by less-important descriptive words. This is called heraldic attitude.



**Serpent Rampant**



**Wings Displayed**



**Lion Dormant**

*Glenn P. Gipson*

## Other areas affected by postpositive adjectives

### 1. titles of leadership and honorary titles:

president-elect  
heir apparent  
professor emeritus  
poet laureate

### 2. in last names:

Grimm's Fairy Tales, an eclectic collection of children's stories, was written by *the Brothers Grimm*.

*Sly and the Family Stone* was an American band from San Francisco which was active from 1966 to 1983; it was pivotal in the development of funk, soul, rock, and psychedelic music. Its core line-up was led by singer-songwriter Sly Stone, and included Stone's brother Freddie Stone, and his sister Rose Stone.

*Glenn P. Gipson*

## Postpositive Adjectives in English

### QUESTIONS

1. Which syntax do postpositive adjectives follow? (1 proper noun)
2. What is the name of an adjective joined directly to a modified noun without a linking verb (e.g., *blue car*)? (1 word)
3. What type of style is achieved by placing the adjective after the noun? (1 word)
4. The French influence was most pronounced in what four areas? (4 words, keep the same order as the reading.)  
A.                      B.                      C.                      D.
5. When forming the plural of these expressions, which is made plural, the noun or the adjective? (1 word)
6. What are the two most common English nouns that take postpositive adjectives? (2 words, keep the same order as the reading.)  
A.                      B.
7. What English adjective is always postpositive? (1 word)
8. Placing the adjective after the noun (if possible) is more formal in style. (write "True" or "False")
9. What is the result of using an idiomatically postpositive adjective in the prepositive position? (1 word)
10. The position of the creature or the animal on the crest of a government or family of prominence can be described in what two words?
11. What English word (derived from the French) is used to create an elite effect in the world of advertising? (1 word)
12. "Your face is so ugly the dogs won't play with you!" is an example of what? (1 word)
13. Give three examples of traditional arenas of power and class in which postpositive adjectives are use. (**Use only small letters.**)  
A. \_\_\_\_\_ attitudes (1 word)  
B. titles of \_\_\_\_\_ (1 word) and \_\_\_\_\_ (2 words)  
C. in \_\_\_\_\_ (2 words)

Glenn P. Gipson