



What are intensifiers? Meanings, examples and how to use them

Intensifiers can help make your English sound stronger and more detailed. They show how much or how strongly you feel about something.

We use intensifiers, like 'really', 'absolutely', or 'truly' to make adjectives or adverbs stronger.

- good: *really* good
- brilliant: *absolutely* brilliant

- well: *really* well
- brilliantly: *absolutely* brilliantly

We use some intensifiers in formal situations (*extremely*, *highly*) and others in informal situations or everyday speech (*really*, *super*, *totally*).

- It is *extremely* unlikely that the results will change after the meeting. (formal)
- I thought the ending of the film was *super* cool. (informal)

Be careful not to use intensifiers too much. Sometimes it's better style to use a stronger adjective instead.

- The film was *really, really* good: The film was **excellent**.

Some adjectives need specific intensifiers, which we'll talk about below.



Common intensifiers with examples

The most common intensifiers in English are ‘*really*’, ‘*very*’, ‘*so*’, ‘*too*’, and ‘*extremely*’. Here are some examples of how they can make the meaning of a sentence stronger.

- The film was good. (neutral sentence)
- The film was *really* good. (stronger meaning)
- She was tired after work. (neutral sentence)
- She was *so* tired after work. (stronger meaning)
- The meeting was long. (neutral sentence)
- The meeting was *too* long. (stronger meaning)
- The coffee was hot. (neutral sentence)
- The coffee was *extremely* hot. (stronger meaning)

How and when to use intensifiers

Intensifiers show how strongly the speaker feels about something. It changes the strength of the adjective or adverb.

To make a word a little bit stronger, we can use words like ‘*a little*’, ‘*slightly*’, or ‘*somewhat*’. To make a word a lot stronger, we can use words like ‘*very*’, ‘*extremely*’, or ‘*absolutely*’.

- She is tired. (states a fact)
- She is *a little* tired. (shows a small change in strength)
- She is *extremely* tired. (shows a big change in strength)



Here are some intensifiers that we can use to make a word a little bit stronger.

somewhat	→	She's <i>somewhat</i> interested in the idea.
fairly	→	The directions were <i>fairly</i> easy to follow.
slightly	→	I'm <i>slightly</i> disappointed in my team.
quite	→	The book was <i>quite</i> interesting.
a little	→	The soup is <i>a little</i> spicy.
a bit	→	I'm <i>a bit</i> tired.

Here are some intensifiers that we can use to make a word a lot stronger.

extremely	→	She's <i>extremely</i> good at solving problems.
highly	→	He's <i>highly</i> skilled at repairing cars.
utterly	→	It was an <i>utterly</i> unforgettable trip.
truly	→	She's <i>truly</i> passionate about teaching.
really	→	Her speech was <i>really</i> interesting.
so	→	The view from the mountain was <i>so</i> beautiful!
totally	→	That's <i>totally</i> unfair!
very	→	The soup tastes <i>very</i> spicy tonight.
completely	→	The streets are <i>completely</i> empty.
absolutely	→	I'm <i>absolutely</i> sure I locked the door.
incredibly	→	His speech was <i>incredibly</i> inspiring.

We can also use intensifiers to be more specific:

particularly	→	I'm <i>particularly</i> proud of this project
especially	→	He's <i>especially</i> talented at playing the piano.



When to use intensifiers?

Some intensifiers are more common in formal situations, and others are more common in informal situations.

- The feedback we've received has been *super* positive. (This is informal and so it might not be appropriate for a formal business meeting.)
- The shopping centre was *exceptionally* busy today. (This is formal and so it might sound a little strange in a conversation between friends.)

Here are some examples of formal and informal intensifiers. Some are neutral and fine to use in both situations.

Intensifier	Formal	Informal	Example
extremely	✓		This meeting is <i>extremely</i> important.
highly	✓		This course is <i>highly</i> recommended.
exceptionally	✓		She did an <i>exceptionally</i> good job.
truly	✓		We're <i>truly</i> sorry that you didn't enjoy your stay.
somewhat	✓		The results were <i>somewhat</i> disappointing.
really		✓	That film was <i>really</i> funny.
super		✓	The food was <i>super</i> tasty.
totally		✓	I'm <i>totally</i> exhausted after that workout.
so		✓	It was <i>so</i> cold last night!
pretty		✓	The hotel was <i>pretty</i> cute.
a bit		✓	I'm <i>a bit</i> nervous about my interview today.
utterly	✓	✓	The proposal was <i>utterly</i> unrealistic.
fairly	✓	✓	He did a <i>fairly</i> good job.
slightly	✓	✓	I'm <i>slightly</i> worried about the exam.
quite	✓	✓	It's <i>quite</i> hot today.
absolutely	✓	✓	That's <i>absolutely</i> right.
incredibly	✓	✓	It was <i>incredibly</i> cold yesterday.
very	✓	✓	He's <i>very</i> friendly.



How do we know which intensifier to use with which adjective?

Using intensifiers with collocations

Not every intensifier works well with every adjective. Some combinations sound natural because we usually use particular words together. We call these combinations of words 'collocations'.

If you use the wrong collocation, people will understand you, but it sounds a little strange.

For example, we DON'T usually say:

- NOT: ~~Extremely freezing~~
- NOT: ~~Completely starving~~
- NOT: ~~Absolutely silent~~
- NOT: ~~Truly huge~~
- NOT: ~~Completely beautiful~~
- NOT: ~~Absolutely wrong~~

On the other hand, here are some collocations which are very natural and common.

Here's a table of some common intensifier + adjective collocations:

absolutely + brilliant, fantastic, amazing	The food was <i>absolutely fantastic</i> .
completely + wrong, silent, different	The room was <i>completely silent</i> .
very + tired, happy, cold	She felt <i>very tired</i> after the run.
highly + recommended, skilled, unlikely	This book is <i>highly recommended</i> .
really + boring, interesting, nice	The lecture was <i>really interesting</i> .
extremely + important, difficult, rare	It's <i>extremely important</i> to study for the exam.
totally + amazing, unacceptable, different	Her behaviour was <i>totally unacceptable</i> .



Gradable and ungradable adjectives

When we choose an intensifier, we also need to think about if the adjective is gradable or ungradable.

Most adjectives are gradable. This means the adjective can be stronger or weaker and we can talk about different levels of meaning. It's also natural to make comparatives and superlatives with gradable adjectives.

'Hot' is a gradable adjective. We have levels of hot.

- It's hot.
- It's *slightly* hot.
- It's *very* hot.
- It's *extremely* hot.
- Spain is *hotter* than the UK.
- Today is *the hottest* day of the year.

But a few adjectives can't be used in this way. The adjective is either true or not true. 'Boiling' is an ungradable adjective. Something is either boiling or not boiling. There aren't different levels of boiling.

- It's boiling!
- NOT: ~~It's slightly boiling.~~
- NOT: ~~It's very boiling.~~
- NOT: ~~It's extremely boiling.~~

However, we can use some intensifiers with ungradable adjectives, for very strong emphasis.



These intensifiers are: absolutely, totally, completely, truly.

Boiling	It was <i>absolutely boiling</i> in the car.
Delicious	The meal was <i>absolutely delicious</i> .
Devastated	He was <i>completely devastated</i> when he lost his job.
Enormous	The house is <i>absolutely enormous</i> .
Excellent	This work is <i>truly excellent</i> .
Exhausted	She was <i>absolutely exhausted</i> .
Fascinating	This book is <i>completely fascinating</i> .
Furious	She was <i>completely furious</i> .
Terrible	What an <i>absolutely terrible</i> day!

Common mistakes with intensifiers

Overusing intensifiers

It's easy to use intensifiers like 'really' too much. It's fine to say 'really good' occasionally, but sometimes it's better style to choose a stronger adjective instead.

The service was <i>really bad</i> . (maybe repetitive)	The service was atrocious . (more interesting)
I received <i>really good</i> feedback from my manager. (maybe repetitive)	I received exceptional feedback from my manager. (more interesting)
Many people consider online learning to be <i>very good</i> . (maybe repetitive)	Many people consider online learning to be superb . (more interesting)



Instead of 'very small'	→ tiny, miniature, compact, little
Instead of 'very good'	→ excellent, fantastic, wonderful, brilliant
Instead of 'very happy'	→ delighted, thrilled, pleased, overjoyed
Instead of 'very big'	→ huge, enormous, massive, gigantic
Instead of 'very tired'	→ exhausted, worn out, drained, shattered
Instead of 'very sad'	→ miserable, heartbroken, gloomy, devastated
Instead of 'very bad'	→ awful, terrible, dreadful, atrocious
Instead of 'very cold'	→ freezing, icy, glacial, cutting
Instead of 'very hot'	→ scorching, boiling, sweltering, roasting
Instead of 'very interesting'	→ fascinating, engaging, captivating, gripping

Conclusion

Intensifiers help make your English more interesting by making the meaning of adjectives and adverbs stronger.

Remember to:

- Choose the right intensifier for the situation (formal or informal).
- Use natural collocations (e.g. *absolutely amazing*, *highly recommended*).
- Don't use 'very' and 'really' too much. Sometimes a stronger adjective is better.