

List of Absolutes

Absolutes are words that shouldn't be modified. They are technically speaking—non-gradable adjectives, which means they can't be compared or *graded*.

According to the [Oxford American dictionary](#)

Non-gradable adjectives are those with meanings which cannot be modified by adverbs.

In the past few decades there has been a trend to use adverbs to try and "intensify" the words. The result is that if the people you're speaking to know anything about the language, you'll sound ridiculous.

Unique has already begun to suffer. How often do you hear someone describe something as "really unique" or "completely unique" or anything along those lines?

I understand what they're saying. They are using unique in the sense that it is moving toward—meaning "unusual"—and not the literal meaning of "one of a kind".

List of Absolutes

absolute	adequate	alive	ancient	avoidable
awake	best	black	blameless	boiling
broken	central	certain	Complete	confirmed
correct	dead	defeated	defective	different
empty	enough	entire	equal	equivalent
eternal	everyday	everything	exact	extinct
faithful	false	fatal	Faulty	final
finest	first	flawless	foreign	gone
greatest	guiltless	guilty	harmless	hopeless
ideal	Identical	immediate	immortal	imperfect
Impossible	inaccurate	incpomparable	incomplete	incurable
individual	inevitable	Inferior	infinite	innocent
invulnerable	irrefutable	irregular	irrevocable	known
lacking	last	literally	malfunctioning	Married
multiple	missing	mortal	necessary	needless
obvious	omnipotent	opposite	overheated	perfect
possible	precise	pregnant	premeditated	present
public	pure	rare	redundant	secondary
silent	single	spotless	straight	Superior
sure	temporary	thorough	Total	true
ultimate	unanimous	unavoidable	unblemished	unbroken
unclear	unconditional	undecided	unequal	unimportant
unique	universal	unknown	unlimited	unmarried
Unnecessary	unpopular	unquestionable	Unsuccessful	up
valid	vital	void	vulnerable	white
whole	widespread	worst	wrong	

This Is *Not* a Comprehensive List of Absolutes

Even though this is not a complete list, it should cover the most abused absolutes. For a far more extensive list, see [Kathy Steinman's site](#). She also has a great book, *The Writer's Lexicon*, which you can get [here](#).

I'm not trying to harp on people's everyday use of the language. I know as much as anyone that language changes all the time, creating new meanings for words that have been around for ages. But there is also no reason to hurry things along. If a word is bound to change, let it, but don't rush it.

A classic example is the sign pictured below. "No smoking at any time." Did they need to use "at any time"? Wasn't "no smoking" enough? I saw another sign that said "absolutely no smoking".



NO SMOKING AT ANY TIME

Absolutes are not normally compared or intensified, at least they shouldn't be. Usually the prefix can clue you in. If a word begins with "in" or "im" or "un", it is very likely an absolute and is non-gradable. Below are a few examples from the list above.

- Impossible (It's either possible or it's not.)
- Imperfect (It's perfect or it's not.)
- Unnecessary (It's necessary or it's not.)
- Unequal (It's equal or it's not.)

The next time you're tempted to modify an absolute—don't. You'll sound better. If you do mess up and say it, don't fret. No one will crucify you for it. Hell, maybe no one will notice. But whatever you do, try not to write it. When you write it, it's permanent.

If you like this, check out another post I did on [absolutes](#).

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