

Misplaced, Interrupting, and Dangling Modifiers

Misplaced Modifiers

A **misplaced modifier** is a word, phrase, or clause that is located incorrectly in relation to the word or words it modifies. Types of misplaced modifiers include the following: **limiting modifiers**, **misplaced phrases and clauses**, and **squinting modifiers**. Modifiers (adjectives, adverbs, and various kinds of phrases and clauses used as adjectives and adverbs) enhance writing by making it more vivid and memorable. Use them to make your writing more concrete and less vague. However, be careful to attach modifiers clearly to the right word or element in a sentence because a misplaced modifier can cause confusion, misunderstanding, or unintentional humor.

For example, in the sentence, *The hostess served cake to the ladies on paper plates*, the phrase *on paper plates* appears to modify *ladies*, yet the writer obviously meant it to modify *cake*. Such confusion can be avoided by placing the modifier close to the word to which it actually refers: *The hostess served cake on paper plates to the ladies*, or *The hostess served the ladies cake on paper plates*.

- **Limiting modifiers**, such as *almost*, *even*, *exactly*, *hardly*, *just*, *merely*, *nearly*, *only*, *scarcely*, and *simply*, restrict or limit the meaning of the word they modify. The result may be an illogical or ambiguous sentence. Modifiers must be carefully placed and must clearly refer to some word or words in a sentence. To make your meaning clear, place these modifiers **before** the words they modify:

Unclear: *He wore only cowboy boots to the rodeo.* (That could be a little embarrassing!)

Revised: *He wore cowboy boots only to the rodeo.* (He reserved his cowboy boots to wear to the rodeo.)

- **Misplaced phrases and clauses** produce sentences with some unintended meanings.

Misplaced phrases: A misplaced phrase is easy to fix.

Humorous: *The clerk handed a vanilla ice-cream cone to the boy covered with chocolate.* (Which is covered with chocolate, the ice cream cone or the boy?)

Revised: *The clerk handed a vanilla ice cream cone covered with chocolate to the boy.*

Misplaced clauses: You have more flexibility in the placement of dependent clauses than with modifying words and phrases; however, you should still try to place dependent clauses close to the words or phrases they modify. Here is an example of an ambiguous sentence due to a misplaced dependent clause:

Unclear: *Professor Jones taught a class on modern films that the students enjoyed.* (Did the students enjoy the class or the films?)

Revised: *The students enjoyed Professor Jones's class on modern films.*

- **Squinting modifiers** confuse the meaning of a sentence because they appear to modify the words that come both before and after them.

Squinting: *The man who spoke quickly ran out of breath.* (Did he speak quickly, or did he quickly run out of breath?)

Revised: *The man who quickly spoke ran out of breath*, or *The man who spoke ran quickly out of breath.*

Squinting: *Snipers who fired on the soldiers often escaped capture.* (Did the snipers fire often, or did they escape capture often?)

Revised: *Often, snipers who fired on the soldiers escaped capture.*

Interrupting Modifiers

Interrupting modifiers are modifiers whose placement causes confusion in sentences. They disrupt the continuity of thought and can make it difficult to grasp the meaning of a sentence. The types of interrupting modifiers are those that **separate a verb from its subject**, **separate a verb from its direct object or subject complement**, **separate parts of a verb phrase**, and **split infinitives**.

- **Modifiers that separate a verb from its subject**—Phrases or clauses that come between a subject and verb can cause confusion.

Awkward: *Classes, because of heavy rain and flooding, were canceled.*

Revised: *Because of heavy rain and flooding, classes were canceled.* This revised sentence keeps the subject and verb together.

- **Modifiers that separate a verb from its direct object or subject complement**—Avoid using modifiers that separate a verb from its object.

Awkward: *The student wrote, during her semester in an English 1301 class at Blinn College, six essays.*

Revised: *During her semester in an English 1301 class at Blinn College, the student wrote six essays.*

The revised sentence keeps the verb and the direct object together.

- **Modifiers that separate parts of a verb phrase**—A verb phrase consists of a main verb and one or more auxiliary (or helping) verbs: *will go, did visit, have practiced, were being seen*, etc. A single adverb or two consecutive adverbs can usually be inserted into a verb phrase without creating an awkward or confusing sentence. However, in all other cases do not split up a verb phrase.

Acceptable: *He had only rarely gone to the beach.*

Awkward: *Many people will, when a commercial comes on the television, change channels or go to the kitchen for a snack.*

Revised: *When a commercial comes on the television, many people will change channels or go to the kitchen for a snack.*

- **Modifiers that split infinitives**—An infinitive consists of the word *to* and a verb (*to run, to enjoy, to win*). The two parts of an infinitive are widely regarded as a grammatical unit that should not be split by placing a word between *to* and the verb. However, the rules about split infinitives have been changing recently. Sometimes the best placement for a single adverb is actually between *to* and the verb:

Orson Welles wanted to realistically portray a Martian invasion for his radio listeners.

If you want to avoid splitting infinitives in your academic writing, one way to revise the sentence is this:

Orson Welles wanted his “Martian invasion” to sound realistic to his radio listeners.

In some cases, a modifier would sound awkward in any position other than between the *to* and the verb:

I hope to almost equal my last year’s income.

To avoid a split infinitive in such cases, it may be best to simply rewrite the sentence without using an infinitive at all:

I hope I will earn almost as much as I did last year.

Almost all readers have difficulty understanding an infinitive when it is split with more than one word:

Its five-year mission is to boldly, loyally, hopefully, and nobly go where no man has gone before.

As a writer, you need to make a decision about the infinitive construction that is appropriate for your readers and the occasion for writing. It is best to avoid split infinitives where possible in formal writing.

- **Modifiers that create textual emphasis**—Experienced writers sometimes use interrupting modifiers to create suspense or achieve emphasis. In the following example, the verb is delayed for effect:

The convenience store robber looked into the security camera and, realizing he was being filmed, fired his gun at the camera.

Dangling Modifiers

Dangling modifiers usually introduce sentences, contain a verb form, and imply rather than name a subject. When the implied subject is not the same as the subject of the sentence, the modifier “dangles” (i.e., it is unconnected to the rest of the sentence). Example:

Dangling: *Skiing down the slope, a large tree came into view.* (The modifying phrase seems to describe a large tree, but trees do not ski. Who was skiing? Who did the viewing?)

Revised: *As Sheila skied down the slope, she spied a large tree.*

- **Revising dangling word and phrase modifiers**

Dangling words: Dangling word modifiers are often adverbs. To revise a dangling word modifier, add the word or words for the adverb to modify.

Dangling: *Courageously, the criminal was arrested.*

Revised: *Courageously, the police officer arrested the criminal.*

Dangling phrases: Dangling participial phrases and prepositional phrases are best revised either by adding the word or words they modify or by changing the modifier into a phrase or a clause that clearly modifies another part of the sentence. Some dangling modifiers can be quite humorous where humor may not be intended, as in this sentence:

Dangling: *Upon entering the doctor’s office, a skeleton caught my attention.*

Revised incorrectly: *A skeleton caught my attention upon entering the doctor’s office.*

Revised: *As I entered the doctor’s office, a skeleton caught my attention.*

- **Revising dangling elliptical clauses**—An *elliptical clause* is a dependent clause that lacks all or part of the subject or predicate. To revise it, include the words implied by the clause.

Dangling: *While galloping, Mary could feel how smooth the horse’s gait was.*

Revised: *While the horse was galloping, Mary could feel how smooth its gait was.*

Sources:

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