

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**, **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. Writers should use them to make their writing more concrete and less vague. However, a writer should 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. A modifier that is not carefully placed in a sentence may present the reader with two or more possible interpretations.

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*.

Another example: *Many birds are hit by automobiles and trucks flying low across the road*. This confusing sentence can be revised by placing *flying low across the road* closer to the word it modifies: *Many birds flying low across the road are hit by automobiles and trucks*.

- **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. Look at this sentence:

He wore cowboy boots only to the rodeo.

If *only* were placed somewhere else in the sentence, the meaning of the sentence would be different:

He wore *only* cowboy boots to the rodeo.

Notice how the second statement is completely different from the first. Placing *only* in a different place in the sentence could certainly create misunderstanding.

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

Misplaced phrases:

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

Stretching across the rooftop, I saw a string of Christmas lights. (It is unlikely the speaker was stretching across the rooftop.)

Misplaced clauses: A writer has more flexibility in the placement of dependent clauses than with modifying words and phrases; however, he or she 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 often?]

Revised: Snipers who *often* fired on the soldiers escaped capture.

Revised: Snipers who fired on the soldiers escaped capture *often*.

When an adverb modifies an entire main clause, it can usually be moved to the beginning of the sentence:

Often, snipers who fired on the soldiers escaped capture.

Make sure your modifiers are placed so they communicate the intended meaning.

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 cancelled.

Revised: Because of heavy rain and flooding, classes were cancelled.

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 first semester in an English 1301 class at Blinn College, six essays.

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

Sentences in which direct objects and subject complements follow immediately after the verb are clearer and easier to read. 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.

Example: 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 other position 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. Example:

Its five-year mission is *to boldly, loyally, hopefully, and nobly go* where no man has gone before. [This is a modified version of the starship *Enterprise’s* mission in *Star Trek*.]

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.

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.

Be sure your meaning stays clear if you decide to separate sentence parts.

Dangling Modifiers

A **dangling modifier** is a word, phrase, or clause that does not sensibly refer to anything in the sentence. The dangling modifier may be closer to another noun or pronoun than its true subject, or its true subject may not be stated in the sentence. It often seems to modify something that is suggested or implied but not actually present in the sentence. Such a modifier is called “dangling” because it loosely hangs from the rest of the sentence. Readers try to correct a dangling modifier, often humorously, by having it modify the closest word in the sentence. To correct a dangling modifier, the writer should clearly state the intended subject in the sentence.

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?]

Dangling: *After mopping the kitchen floor*, the dog was fed.

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).

- **Revising dangling word and phrase modifiers** – Dangling word modifiers are often adverbs. To revise a dangling word modifier, add the word or words for the modifier to modify.

Dangling: *Courageously*, the criminal was arrested.

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

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.

A dangling modifier cannot be repaired by simply moving it within the sentence, as in this sentence:

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

This sentence still suggests the skeleton entered the doctor’s office.

Here are two revised sentences where the dangling modifier has been repaired:

Upon entering the doctor’s office, I noticed a skeleton.

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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