

MISPLACED and DANGLING MODIFIERS

Modifiers are words that describe or qualify other words or word groups. Basically, every word in the sentence is a modifier except the subject, verb, and direct object (if there is one).

The **MISPLACED MODIFIER** is the most common modifier error. In English, modifiers are supposed to be placed as close as possible to the words that they modify so that their meaning is clear and the reader will not be confused. Problems occur when modifiers are not placed near the word they modify.

Incorrect: *Maria bathed the dog with a soapy sponge.* (this sounds like the dog has the sponge)

Correct: *With a soapy sponge, Maria bathed the dog.*

Adverbs that limit (*almost, nearly, just, exactly, even, hardly, merely, scarcely, simply, and only*) often cause problems. Note the changes in meaning in the following sentences when the word “only” is moved:

Only yesterday, Kari met Sam. (yesterday, not a week, month, or year ago)

Yesterday, Kari met only Sam. (She did not meet anyone else.)

Yesterday, only Kari met Sam. (No one else met him.)

Yesterday, Kari only met Sam. (She met him, but did not do anything else.)

Relative clauses beginning with *which* and *that* are also frequently misplaced. Note the change in the meaning between these sentences:

UPS delivered a package to our door that weighed 50 pounds. (Did the door weigh 50 pounds?)

UPS delivered a package that weighed 50 pounds to our door. (the package weighed 50 pounds)

Make sure prepositional phrases are in the right place.

Incorrect: *Juan told Gina in August he would go to Hawaii.*

(Did he tell her in August, or is he going in August?)

Correct: *In August, Juan told Gina he would go to Hawaii.* (he told her in August)

Juan told Gina he would go to Hawaii in August. (he is going in August)

The **DANGLING MODIFIER** is another common modifier error. It is a word, phrase, or clause that does not modify anything clearly or logically. It may have been awkwardly separated from the word on which its meaning depends, or that word may be missing altogether.

A dangling modifier cannot be corrected by simply moving it around in its sentence. There are several ways to correct dangling modifiers, either by adding words or rewriting parts of the sentence.

One way to correct a dangling modifier is to leave the modifier as it is and rewrite the rest of the sentence:

Dangling: *After working on it all day, my room was finally clean.* (sounds like the room worked all day)

Corrected: *After working on it all day, I finally had my room clean.*

Another way to correct dangling modifiers is to expand them into dependent clauses.

Dangling: *After reading the newspaper, my dog tore it up.* (did the dog read the newspaper?)

Corrected: *After I finished reading the newspaper, my dog tore it up.*

Practice Exercises

Directions: Rewrite the following sentences by correctly placing the modifiers.

1. Brian discovered that he enjoyed writing after awhile.

2. Professor Atkins is an expert on volcanoes from the University of Colorado.

3. Rosa received flowers from Fred that will never wilt.

4. Lola selected a donut from the bakery filled with banana cream.

5. Have you noticed that on TV, everything seems to exactly cost \$19.95?

6. Janice presented her new book to the faculty, which was full of academic anecdotes.

Directions: Rewrite the following sentences to correct the dangling modifiers.

7. To impress his instructor, Derek's essay was written on a computer.

8. At five years of age, my parents gave me a tricycle.

9. Running up the three flights of stairs, my heart felt as though it might burst.

10. When on vacation, the bills piled up.

11. Swimming in the ocean, my eyes were irritated by the salt water.

Directions: Rewrite the following sentences to correct the misplaced or dangling modifiers.

12. Emily told Jim that she loved him last Monday.

13. Being polluted, my father did not swim in the lake.

14. There was a noisy disturbance when the politician made her speech at the back of the hall.

15. I baked a cake for our faculty which was full of fruits and nuts.

16. Wearing corduroy pants, he made considerable noise in that class.
