

Misplaced and Dangling Modifiers

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about how modifiers function in sentences, and how to spot certain mistakes when using modifiers. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Modifiers in Sentences
2. Common Modifier Errors
 - 2a. Misplaced Modifiers
 - 2b. Dangling Modifiers

1. Modifiers in Sentences

A **modifier** is a part of a sentence that does just what its name indicates— it modifies or adjusts. Technically, a modifier is a word, phrase, or clause that provides more information about something in the sentence.

Modifiers do this by pairing up with another word or phrase and slightly shifting its meaning.

➞ **EXAMPLE** *Excitedly hoisting her fishing rod, Susan headed out to the river.*

That first phrase is the modifier; the information about Susan's behavior and emotions as she leaves is adding to your understanding of the sentence. You now know that she's not heading out to the river sadly or without her fishing gear. She's excited, and she's got her tackle ready.

That modifier alters what you know about Susan, and therefore, is located right next to her name. This is ideal, as modifiers should always be situated close to the part of the sentence that they're modifying.



TERM TO KNOW

Modifier

A word, phrase, or clause that provides more information about something in a sentence.

2. Common Modifier Errors

When you get your modifiers wrong, you can end up with either of the following errors:

- Misplaced modifiers
- Dangling modifiers

Both of these are errors that can affect your readers' ability to understand your sentences, so you need to fix them as soon as you see them. This is what the editing process is for.

2a. Misplaced Modifiers

When you lose track of where your modifier is and what it's meant to be doing, then you have a **misplaced modifier**. This is a modifier that is separate from the thing it modifies in the sentence; it does not logically modify what it is supposed to.

Remember how a modifier should come as close as possible to the thing it's modifying? This is so you don't end up misplacing that modifier and confusing your readers about what it's supposed to be modifying.

Misplaced modifiers can create confusion about what they are meant to modify and why, or they can end up modifying the wrong thing altogether.

➞ **EXAMPLE** *The coat that I tried on was too big in the store.*

If you took out where the trying on happened ("in the store"), you'd still have a full sentence that makes sense. Thus, you know that "in the store" is a phrase that's meant to modify something.

But what is it meant to modify? If you think about the sentence literally, it sounds like the coat was too big when the speaker tried it on in the store, but maybe it wasn't too big outside of the store, or it's not too big now. That place and time-based modifier is misplaced, and therefore doesn't clearly do its job.

➞ **EXAMPLE** *The coat that I tried on in the store was too big.*

Now you know that the coat was too big everywhere, but the speaker tried it on in the store and that's where she realized it was too big. By placing the modifier right next to the thing it's modifying, you can understand the entire meaning of this sentence.



TRY IT

Look at the sentence and modifier below:

- Sentence: *I'll serve coffee to my guests.*
- Modifier: *in big red mugs*

Decide where in the sentence that modifier should go.

+

If you put it here, then what is it closest to? *I'll serve coffee to my guests in big red mugs.* The guests.

Are the guests somehow inside what must be very big red mugs? That wouldn't make sense.

Therefore, you should probably put the modifier here, next to the coffee, because the coffee is what's being modified, and that's what's going in the mugs: *I'll serve coffee in big red mugs to my guests.*

As you can see, misplaced modifiers can really influence the meaning of a sentence because modifiers themselves are very powerful.

IN CONTEXT

Take the sentence "I sold my muffins," and think about how the meaning changes when you add the modifier "just" in different spots:

- *I just sold my muffins.*
- *I sold just my muffins.*

The first sentence implies that it was mere moments ago that the speaker sold the muffins; the second sentence implies that there may have been other things for sale, but the speaker sold only the muffins.

Be careful to think through your intended meaning and place your modifiers deliberately to avoid creating unintended implications.



TERM TO KNOW

Misplaced Modifier

A modifier that is separate from the thing it modifies in a sentence, meaning that it does not logically modify what it is intended to.

2b. Dangling Modifiers

If you add a modifier to a sentence without actually letting it attach to its mate, then you have what is called a **dangling modifier**. This is a word or phrase that modifies something not clearly identified in the sentence.

Remember that modifiers are always paired with another part of the sentence, so if that modifier is all alone, it's just dangling there, unable to attach its meaning to anything else.

This can have unintended consequences as readers search for a connection where there isn't one.

➞ **EXAMPLE** *Thirsty, the milk was gone in minutes.*

Somehow, you've ended up with live milk that's fleeing the kitchen in search of something to drink. That's not a clear sentence; that's science fiction.

"Thirsty" is the modifier; without that word, the sentence "The milk was gone in minutes" makes a lot of sense. "Thirsty" is meant to modify something in the sentence, but it's missing its pair, and is thus unintentionally modifying the milk itself.

You need, then, people to drink the milk or people to be thirsty.

➞ **EXAMPLE** *Thirsty, the children drank up all the milk in minutes.*

Here, you've added in children who are thirsty and are going to drink that milk. Notice that the end result of this sentence still tells your readers that the milk is gone; the children drank it up. Adding in the modifier's match

changes the sentence, but it doesn't change the intended meaning.

Dangling modifiers create unclear, grammatically incorrect sentences, and they can cause a host of unintended meanings to spring up in readers' minds. Thus, be careful to always give a modifier its match and avoid science fiction sentences.



TERM TO KNOW

Dangling Modifier

A modifier that attempts to modify something not clearly identified in a sentence.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that **in sentences, modifiers** are words, phrases, or clauses that provide more information about something in the sentence. When you write, you should be careful about how you use your modifiers in order to avoid **common modifier errors**. **Misplaced modifiers** are modifiers that are separate from the things they modify in a sentence, and **dangling modifiers** are modifiers that modify things not clearly identified in the sentence. Paying attention to these grammatical issues is essential to achieving clear, concise writing that your readers will understand.

Best of luck in your learning!



TERMS TO KNOW

Dangling Modifier

A modifier that attempts to modify something not clearly identified in a sentence.

Misplaced Modifier

A modifier that is separate from the thing it modifies in a sentence, meaning that it does not logically modify what it is intended to.

Modifier

A word, phrase, or clause that provides more information about something in a sentence.