

# Dangling and Misplaced Modifiers

## DANGLING MODIFIERS

A dangling modifier is a phrase or clause that does not logically modify any word in the sentence in which it appears. Although most commonly found at the beginning of the sentence, the dangling modifier may be located at the end of the sentence, too.

Example: Swimming out into the lake, the water grew cold.

(The only noun in the main clause is "water. The water was not swimming.)

Correct a dangling modifier in one of two ways:

1. Supply the noun or pronoun that it should modify and place the modifier next to the word.

Example: Swimming out into the lake, I felt the water grow cold.

2. Change the dangling construction into a complete clause.

Example: As I swam into the lake, the water felt cold.

Dangling modifiers usually take one of four forms:

### I. Dangling Participial Phrase (An "-ing" verb form)

Example: Stepping into the boat, my camera dropped into the water.

Revision: Stepping into the boat, I dropped my camera into the water.

While I was stepping into the boat, my camera dropped into the water.

Example: The mountains were snow-covered and cloudless, flying over the Rockies.

Revision: When I flew over the Rockies, the mountains were snow covered and cloudless.

Flying over the Rockies, I saw that the mountains were snow covered and cloudless.

Example: Driving through the mountains, many bears were seen.

Revision:

### 2. Dangling Gerunds (An "-ing" verb form used as a noun)

Example: After driving all day, the motel was a welcome sight.

Revision: After driving all day, we welcomed the sight of the motel.

After we had driven all day, the motel was a welcome sight.

Example: Before exploring the desert, our water supply was replenished.

Revision:

### 3. Dangling Infinitives ("To" plus a root verb)

Example: To write effectively, practice is necessary.

Revision: To write effectively, one must practice.

If one wishes to write effectively, practice is necessary. (or. ..one must practice.)

Example: To examine the brakes, the wheel must be removed.

Revision:

4. Dangling Elliptical Clauses (A clause in which the subject or verb is understood)

Example: While combing my hair this morning, a man's face appeared at the window.

Revision: While combing my hair this morning, I saw a man's face appear at the window.

While I was combing my hair this morning, a man's face appeared at the window.

Example: When a baby, my grandfather gave me a silver cup.

Revision:

Many phrases are well established introductory expressions and are permissible in formal writing.

Examples: Judging from past experience. .. In the first place. .. Considering the situation. .. Granted the results. .. To sum up. ..

MISPLACED MODIFIERS

Because word order is often important to the meaning of a sentence, a modifier, be it a phrase or a word, should be placed as close as possible to the word it modifies. Many modifiers can be moved to various positions in the sentence, but if ambiguity results, the word order must be corrected.

Misplaced modifiers generally take one of four forms:

1. Misplaced Adverbs

Example: This will only take five minutes.

I nearly earned a hundred dollars.

Revision: This will take only five minutes.

I earned nearly a hundred dollars.

Example: I have followed the advice faithfully given by the manual.

Revision:

2. Misplaced Phrases and Clauses

Example: He lost the chance to make large profits through the work of imitators.

Revision: Through the work of imitators, he lost the chance to make large profits.

Example: He searched around and found an old bus schedule in the drawer that was out of date.

Revision: He searched around and found in a drawer an old bus schedule that was out of date.

Example: I heard that Senator Jones had been shot on the morning broadcast.

Revision:

3. Squinting Modifiers (A word or phrase placed in a position so that it modifies either a preceding word or the word after it)

Example: Reading a book frequently will change the whole course of a man's life.

Revision: Reading a book will frequently change the whole course of a man's life.

Example: The child who lies in nine cases out of ten is frightened.

Revision:

4. Split Infinitives (A modifier of one or more words placed between the "to" and the root verb)

Example: It was my custom to at least once a month visit my grandmother.

Revision: It was my custom to visit my grandmother at least once a month. Example: She tried to carefully handle the kitten.

Revision:

PRACTICE A

Using the following phrases and elliptical clauses as introductory modifiers, write complete sentences.

Example: Having weeded the garden, my father sat down to admire his handiwork.

1. When putting the microfilm on the reader,
2. Skiing behind the boat,
3. To be on time for my first class,
4. Before placing the overseas call,
5. Having lined up by the fountain,
6. Frequently interrupted by others living in the dormitory,
7. Not wishing to disturb the student working in the reference room,
8. While exploring the attic,
9. To make good coffee,
10. Thinking realistically about the future,

PRACTICE EXERCISE B

Revise the following sentences to correct any dangling or misplaced modifiers.

Write the correction in the spaces above the sentences, using arrows if necessary to show the correct position of the modifier. Write "C" if the sentence is correct.

Example: He sent us the full story of his rescue from the Ozarks.

1. Burned to a cinder, I could not eat the toast.
2. Do not apply the paint until thoroughly stirred.
3. While sleeping, the covers were kicked off the bed.
4. After barking at the moon past midnight, the Nortons decided to complain to the dog's owners.
5. To appreciate D. W. Griffith's films, the period in which they were produced must be understood.
6. At the end of the period we were told to promptly hand in our bluebooks.

7. Concerned by the international news, Washington was the best place for the President.
8. She wore a ribbon in her hair which was a light pink.
9. The film about the life of the sea otter which I saw downtown was very interesting.
10. He wrote his book on gambling in Iowa.
11. When trying to make the hook shot, the floor proved to be too slippery for Clarence.
12. The rain began to fall immediately after planting the grass.
13. While examining the sapphire, the experienced jeweler detected the scratch.
14. To become thoroughly familiar with the resources of a large library, years of experience are required.
15. Never having been to Hong Kong, it was foolish for her to choose it as the setting of her short story.
16. While lecturing on his favorite subject for the third day, students napped or wrote letters.
17. The term reactionary can be applied to political, social, or economic (or a combination of the three) beliefs.
18. After nicking a submerged rock, the canoe began to slowly but steadily leak and to gradually settle deeper in the water.
19. She told him to for Heaven's sake shut up.
20. Having come across the work of both Henry James and Samuel Clemens in the old magazines, a fascinating pastime was exploring other issues.
21. When waiting for the dentist, every sound from the office is nerve-wracking.
22. After correcting my original calculations, the problem was finally solved.
23. Having seen Beckett's Waiting for Godot, my attitude toward modern drama has changed completely.
24. The directions were clear, and my trouble could have been prevented, if followed correctly.
25. To write a successful research paper, one should follow certain prescribed steps.

## MISPLACED MODIFIERS

A misplaced modifier is a word, phrase or clause that is awkwardly placed in the sentence so that it does not describe what the writer wanted it to describe. In other words, a misplaced modifier is placed so that it does not modify what it is intended to modify.

To avoid this problem, place a modifier as close as possible to the word it modifies.

**MISPLACED MODIFIER:** Jeff bought an old jeep from a crooked dealer with a faulty transmission.

Did the jeep or the crooked dealer have a faulty transmission? Yes, it was the jeep; therefore, the modifying phrase is awkwardly placed. The phrase with a faulty transmission should be next to the word jeep, the word it modifies.

**CORRECTED MODIFIER:** Jeff bought an old jeep with a faulty transmission from a crooked dealer.

As you can see, many misplaced modifiers actually cause a sentence to be quite funny; unfortunately, the reader may not have a sense of humor!

**MISPLACED MODIFIER:** Sam screamed at the barking dog in his underwear.

Now, really, did the dog wear underwear?

**CORRECTED EXAMPLE:** Sam, in his underwear, screamed at the barking dog.

Modifying words and phrases should be as close as possible to the word they describe, preferably right next to the word they describe. Modifiers may be placed either before or after the word they describe, but the location may change the meaning of the sentence.

**MISPLACED MODIFIER:** Frances nearly earned fifty dollars.

Frances earned nothing because she just couldn't nearly earn. The modifier must be moved. Frances did not nearly earn; she earned nearly fifty. The modifier nearly is describing how many dollars she earned and thus should be placed next to the word fifty.

**CORRECTED EXAMPLE:** Frances earned nearly fifty dollars.

Depending on where they are placed in the sentence, the words “nearly” and “only” can change the meaning of a sentence. Consider John and his books:

Only John carried his books to class.

John only carried his books to class.

John carried only his books to class.

John carried his books only to class.

### DANGLING MODIFIERS

**A modifying phrase or clause is said to dangle when it has no stated word to describe. A dangling modifier is sometimes difficult to identify because our brains supply the missing word. To correct a dangling modifier, you must rewrite the sentence and supply the word that is to be modified.**

**DANGLING MODIFIER:** While smoking a pipe, my cat curled up next to me.

Did the cat smoke the pipe? Obviously not, but the sentence does not identify who smoked the pipe. You must supply a subject and, sometimes, supply additional words to create verbs, clauses or phrases. In the following sentences the new subject and additional words are in bold letters.

**CORRECTED EXAMPLE:** While **I was** smoking a pipe, my cat curled up next to me.  
OR While smoking a pipe, **I allowed** my cat **to curl** up next to me.

**DANGLING MODIFIER:** Climbing the mountain, a rock hit John's head.

Who was climbing the mountain? The rock? Jim? We must rewrite the sentence for clarity.

**CORRECTED EXAMPLE:** **When John was** climbing the mountain, a rock hit his head. OR Climbing the mountain, John was hit on the head by a rock.

**DANGLING MODIFIER:** Being out of order, the president asked me to sit down.

Who was being out of order? The president? Me? Rewrite the sentence.

**CORRECTED EXAMPLE:** Being out of order, I was asked by the president to sit down. OR Because I was out of order, the president asked me to sit down.

**EXERCISE 1:** First, underline the modifying phrase and circle the word it modifies. Then, rewrite the sentence so that the modifying phrase is as close as possible to the word it describes. *Note: Some sentences contain two modifying phrases.* Check your answers in the back of this handout.

1. Jack walked into only the house of horrors.
2. She almost needed one day to complete the assignment.
3. Her boyfriend opened the door with a wicked smile.
4. We nearly waited one month for the answer to our questions.
5. My friend took me for a ride after showering and shaving on the skyway.
6. On the way to the movie, a bee stung Dean.
7. The cat should be treated by a veterinarian that has worms.
8. The house in the Arlington area faces the river which Mr. Smith bought.
9. After reaching a weight of 275 pounds, the doctor insisted that Mr. Wright go on a strict diet.
10. Shane washed her hair when she finished eating with a new shampoo.

**EXERCISE 2:** The following sentences contain dangling modifiers. You will have to supply a subject and rewrite the sentence so that the modifying phrase is in the correct location to describe its subject. Check your answers in the back of this handout.

1. While sweeping the floor, the stew boiled over on the stove.
2. To write correctly, proper English should be used.
3. After putting a new ribbon in the printer, my papers looked better.
4. While washing his brother's car, a scratch was discovered on the bumper.
5. Thinking of something else, the instructor's voice surprised me.
6. While writing my paper, the telephone rang.
7. To understand our new policy, the LAC's brochures were read.
8. Being short of money, an inexpensive restaurant had to be found.
9. On coming back to school after vacation, a new work schedule was developed.
10. By jogging five miles a day a toned body was insured.