



APSU Writing Center

Dangling and Misplaced Modifiers

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Resources: The Writer's Harbrace Handbook, 3rd edition and The LB Brief Handbook, 5th edition

- Modifiers are words, phrases, or clauses that modify, and they qualify or limit the meaning of other words. They enhance clarity and description in a sentence, and they need to be placed correctly within the sentence so its meaning becomes clear. When placed incorrectly, they may confuse readers.

Dangling Modifier: a common error, is a modifier that does not clearly modify another word or word group in a sentence.

- Dangling modifiers are words, phrases, or reduced clauses lacking an appropriate noun, noun phrase, or pronoun that modifies the original idea, or subject of the sentence.
- Sometimes a dangling modifier contains a form of an action verb, but the sentence has no clear subject performing that action.
- **Example 1:** Crouched and ugly, the young boy gasped at the phantom moving across the stage. (The boy is crouched and ugly in this sentence.)
 - **To correct this sentence, move the modifier:** The young boy gasped at the crouched and ugly phantom moving across the stage.
- **Example 2:** After listening to Richie's speech, the mood in the room changed. (The sentence shows the mood listened to the speech.)
 - **To correct this sentence, reword the modifier:** After Richie listened to the speech, the mood in the room changed.

Misplaced Modifiers

- A descriptive or qualifying word or phrase placed in the wrong position, confusing the reader.
- **Example 1:** I decided to cook my grandson some breakfast. (I decided to cook my grandson?!)
 - **To correct this sentence, move the modifier:** I decided to cook some breakfast for my grandson.
- **Example 2:** I read about a wildfire that was out of control in yesterday's paper. ("In yesterday's paper" shows where the wildfire was.)
 - **To correct this sentence, place the modifier where it belongs:** In yesterday's paper, I read about a wildfire that was out of control.

Modifiers such as *almost*, *even*, *hardly*, *just*, and *only* are clearest when they are placed right before the words they modify. Altering placement can alter meaning.



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- **Examples:**

- The committee can *only* nominate two members for the position.
 - (The committee cannot appoint or elect the two people to the position; the committee can simply nominate. That's all.)
- The committee can nominate *only* two members for the position.
 - (The committee cannot nominate more than two members.)
- *Only* the committee can nominate two members for the position.
 - (No person or group other than the committee can nominate members.)

Place prepositional phrases and adjectival clauses as close as possible to the word or word group they modify. Misplaced phrases and clauses cause confusion.

- **Example:**

- She recorded the song from the movie *that was her favorite*.
 - (The sentence shows the movie was her favorite when the writer actually meant the song from the movie was.)

Revisions Based on Its Intended Meaning:

She recorded her *favorite song* from the movie.

She recorded a song from her *favorite movie*.

The following sentence is correct as long as Jesse wrote the proposal, not the review:

- I have not read the review of the proposal Jesse wrote.

If he wrote the review, either the modifying clause should be moved or the sentence reordered:

- I have not read the review Jesse wrote of the proposal.
- I have not read Jesse's review of the proposal.

Squinting Modifiers

- A squinting modifier is one that might be interpreted as modifying either what precedes or follows it. To avoid this lack of clarity and prevent confusion, move the modifier and/or provide appropriate punctuation. Squinting modifiers may modify only one element.
 - **Example:** Even though Erikson lists some advantages, *overall* his vision of a successful business is faulty.
 - **Revision:** Even though Erikson lists some *overall* advantages, his vision of a successful business is faulty.
 - (The word *overall* is repositioned, and punctuation is added. *Overall* describes advantages.)
 - **Revision:** Even though Erikson lists some advantages, *overall*, his vision of a successful business is faulty.
 - (Punctuation is added, and *overall* describes vision.)