

Misplaced Modifiers

LEARN TO SPOT MODIFIERS

describe or reveal something about other words. Modifiers act as or . Adjectives describe and . Adverbs describe , , and other adverbs.

adjective noun

An honest politician is a treasure.

[*Honest* describes *politician*.]

adjective

noun

Towering above the city, the cathedral shimmered in the sunlight.

[*Towering above the city* describes *cathedral*.]

verb

adverb

Questioned by the police, the suspect responded nervously.

[*Nervously* explains how the suspect *responded*.]

Adverb

verb

adjective

noun

Before he entered the navy, my father worked as an automotive engineer.

[*Before he entered the navy* tells when father *worked*; *automotive* describes *engineer*.]

CORRECT MISPLACED MODIFIERS

Place the modifier as close to the word it describes as you can. If you don't, your reader may have difficulty telling which word in the sentence you want to modify.

Misplaced: *When only a boy, Joe's aunt took him to the rodeo.*

Revised: *Joe's aunt took him to the rodeo when he was only a boy.*

The first sentence actually describes Joe's aunt as a boy.

AVOID CONFUSING MODIFIERS

Modifiers cause confusion when they refer to words that come before and after them at the same time.

Confusing: *She claimed Friday she saw a UFO.* [Did the UFO appear on *Friday*, or was *Friday* when she claimed to have seen it?]

Revised: *Friday, she claimed she saw a UFO.* [*Friday* is when she made the claim.]

OR

Revised: *She claimed she saw a UFO Friday.* [*Friday* is when she saw it.]

Placing the Words *Only*, *Even*, and *Just*

Where you place the words *only* and *just* in a sentence can change the meaning of a sentence.

1. *Sam only worked in Phoenix for three years.*
2. *Sam worked only in Phoenix for three years.*
3. *Sam worked in Phoenix for only three years.*

NOTE: These three sentences are correct, but they mean different things.

Place the modifier as close as you can to the word it describes.

1. *Sam only worked in Phoenix for three years.*

Only modifies *worked*, a verb. The sentence means “Sam did nothing but work in Phoenix for three years.”

2. *Sam worked only in Phoenix for three years.*

Only modifies *in Phoenix*. The sentence means “Sam worked nowhere but in Phoenix for three years.”

3. *Sam worked in Phoenix for only three years.*

Only modifies *three*. The sentence means “Sam worked in Phoenix no more than three years.”

CORRECT DANGLING MODIFIERS

Modifiers must point clearly to the words they describe. Otherwise, sentences may seem illogical. This happens if you forget to mention the word a modifier is suppose to describe. In such cases, the modifier is said to “dangle”; it has nothing to hang on to. Say you wrote

Dangling: *Walking across the field, the river came into view.*

Your reader would surely know that you – not the river – were walking. But that’s not what the sentence says. To correct dangling modifiers, add the word(s) you forgot. To do so, however, you might have to rewrite the sentence.

Revised: *Walking across the field, I saw the river.*

Now, *Walking across the field* clearly points to the pronoun *I*.

Working with *It Is* and *It was* Construction

You might create a dangling modifier if you follow a modifier with a main clause whose subject is *It* and whose verb is *was* or another form of *to be*.

Dangling: *Concerned about the rain, it was decided that the picnic should be canceled.*

[*Concerned about the rain* has nothing to modify except the word *it*, which refers to no word in the sentence.]

Revised: *Concerned about the rain, our club decided to call off the picnic.*

[Now, *Concerned about the rain* clearly refers to *club*, a subject the reader can identify.]

MAINTAIN PARALLELISM

A sentence may contain a series of words, , or . To make it , be consistent within the series: use with nouns, with verbs, [clauses](#) with subordinate clauses, and so on.

Not Parallel: *He bought a tie, a shirt, and purchased a scarf.*

Parallel: *He bought a tie, a shirt, and a scarf.*

The first sentence contains a series that is not consistent. The first two items are nouns, but the third – *purchased a scarf* – contains a verb. In the second sentence, all three items – *tie, shirt, and scarf* – are nouns.

USING PARALLELISM TO CREATE COMPARISONS AND CONTRASTS

Always compare like things; otherwise, your sentence won't be parallel.

Not parallel: *The mountains of the West are younger than the East.*

[This sentence compares things that are not alike: *the mountains* and *the East*.]

You can't correct this problem in two ways:

Parallel: *The mountains of the West are younger than the mountains of the East.*

Parallel: *The mountains of the West are younger than those of the East.*

CREATING PARALLELISM WITH CORRELATIVES

Some pairs of words can help make sentences parallel. These are correlatives: *either ... or*, *neither ... nor*, and *not only ... but also*.

When you use these pairs, remember to join the same kinds of elements.

All past: *Whenever visitors approached, our dog barked loudly.*

AVOID ILLOGICAL VOICE SHIFTS

Verbs take various tenses. They also come in active voice or passive voice. A verb in the active voice takes a subject – person, place, or thing – that does an action. A verb in the passive voice takes a subject that is acted upon.

Active: *The students admire the teacher.*

Passive: *The teacher is admired by the students.*

NOTE: Verbs in the passive voice always contain at least two words: a form of the verb to be (is) and the participle (admired).

CAUTION: Shifting from one voice to another in the same sentence often makes the sentence hard to read. Shifting the voice also makes your messages less direct and emphatic.

Inconsistent: *Beautiful birds were seen as she entered the garden.*

Consistent: *She saw beautiful birds as she entered the garden.*

The first example begins in the passive voice and then shifts to the active. In the second example, both verbs are in the active voice.

Sample Quiz questions:

1. Choose the item that has no misplaced modifiers.
 - a. In the summer of 2006, Donna, a graduate of my high school, made a film about hurricanes.
 - b. Donna, a graduate of my high school, made in the summer of 2006 a film about hurricanes.
 - c. Donna, a graduate of my high school, made a film about hurricanes in the summer of 2006.

Answer: a. In the summer of 2006, Donna, a graduate of my high school, made a film about hurricanes.

2. Choose the item that has no misplaced modifiers.
 - a. Bought by his wife, he found it hard to program the DVD player.
 - b. His DVD player, which his wife had bought him, proved hard to program.
 - c. His DVD player proved hard to program, which his wife had bought him.

Answer: b. His DVD player, which his wife had bought him, proved hard to program.