

Handout Topic: Misplaced and Dangling Modifiers

What is a modifier?

A modifier is a word that functions to limit the meaning of another word, phrase, or clause. Writing with clarity means making sure that connections between modifiers and the word(s) they are modifying is understood.

Mistakes with modifiers can fall into two general categories: misplaced modifiers and dangling modifiers. A misplaced modifier means that a modifier's position within a sentence makes its meaning unclear (or, even worse, alters the meaning entirely). Typically, the sentence can be made clear by re-positioning the modifier within the sentence.

Examples:

e.g. Many politicians play tennis in the provincial legislature. (unclear because “in the provincial legislature” is a misplaced modifier; are there tennis courts in the legislature?)

e.g. Many politicians in the legislature play tennis. (clear)

A specific type of misplaced modifier is called a squinting modifier. A squinting modifier occurs when a modifier appears to modify more than one element in a sentence. A squinting modifier is often, although not always, a result of an adverb's ability to be placed nearly anywhere in a sentence.

e.g. Students who come to the Writing Resource Centre often can improve their writing skills. (unclear what *often* is modifying: do students need to visit the Writing Resource Centre frequently, or will their writing frequently improve from a visit?)

e.g. Students who come often to the Writing Resource Centre can improve their writing skills. (clear)

e.g. Students who come to the Writing Resource Centre can often improve their writing skills. (clear)

A dangling modifier is a modifier that does not modify anything in the sentence, although usually it implies what it is modifying.

e.g. After reading the background material, the article remains unclear. (dangling modifier)

When a sentence opens with a modifier, like it does in the example above, the actor (the “doer” of the action) must be named as the subject of the clause that follows. In the example

above, the modifier is dangling because the actor appears to be the article itself (i.e. it seems as though the “the article” read the background material).

e.g. After reading the background article, I found the article unclear. (correct)

e.g. To become a respected politician, campaign funds must be administered correctly. (incorrect; “campaign funds” cannot become a respected politician)

e.g. To become a respected politician, you must administer campaign funds correctly. (correct)

e.g. Having washed all the dishes, the chores were done. (incorrect; “the chores” cannot wash dishes)

e.g. Having washed all the dishes, Peter had finished his chores. (correct)

One last type of modifier error is called a split infinitive. Infinitive forms of verbs appear as *to + verb* (e.g. *to run, to form, to rise*). Split infinitives occur when a modifier is positioned in between the *to* and the verb form; this sort of construction is to be avoided. Similarly, it is not a good idea to interrupt verb phrases (e.g. *was being run, will go*) with modifiers either.

e.g. Most of the strikers expected the union to, after a short period of picketing, give in to the company’s demands. (incorrect; split infinitive)

e.g. After a short period of picketing, most of the strikers expected the union to give in to the company’s demands. (correct)

Exercises: What is wrong with the following sentences? Revise them accordingly.

1. All students are not young.
2. In order to find a new apartment, patience is essential.
3. The new prime minister decided to formally announce his cabinet yesterday.
4. Finding his current job too demanding, many new careers were considered.
5. Though only sixteen, Hockey Canada named Alice to the team anyway.