Misplaced and Dangling Modifiers


Misplaced Modifiers

A misplaced modifier is a word, phrase, or clause that is improperly separated from the word it modifies / describes.

Because of the separation, sentences with this error often sound awkward, ridiculous, or confusing. Furthermore, they can be downright illogical.

Example

On her way home, Jan found a gold man's watch.

The example above suggests that a gold man owns a watch.

Misplaced modifiers can usually be corrected by moving the modifier to a more sensible place in the sentence, generally next to the word it modifies.

Example

On her way home, Jan found a man's gold watch.

Now it is the watch that is gold.

There are several kinds of misplaced modifiers:

1. Misplaced adjectives are incorrectly separated from the nouns they modify and almost always distort the intended meaning.

   Example 1

   The child ate a cold dish of cereal for breakfast this morning.

   Correct the error by placing the adjective next to the noun it modifies.
Sentences like these are common in everyday speech and ordinarily cause their listeners no trouble. However, they are quite imprecise and, therefore, should have NO place in your writing.

2. **Placement of adverbs** can also change meaning in sentences.

For example, the sentences below illustrate how the placement of **just** can change the sentence’s meaning.

*Just means only John was picked, no one else:*

> **Just** John was picked to host the program.

*Just means that John was picked now:*

> John was **just** picked to host the program.

*Just means that John hosted only the program, nothing else:*

> John was picked to host **just** the program.

Each of these sentences says something logical but quite **different**, and its correctness depends upon what the writer has in mind.
Often, **misplacing an adverb** not only alters the intended meaning, but also creates a sentence whose meaning is highly unlikely or completely ridiculous.

This sentence, for example, suggests that we *brought* a lunch *slowly*:

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We ate the lunch that we had brought slowly.
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To repair the meaning, move the adverb slowly so that it is near *ate*.

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We slowly ate the lunch that we had brought.
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Watch out for adverbs such as *only, just, nearly, merely,* and *almost*. They are often misplaced and cause an unintended meaning.

This sentence, for example, means that I only *contributed* the money:

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I only contributed $10.00 to the fund for orphaned children.
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Repaired, however, the sentence means that I contributed only $10.00.

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I contributed only $10.00 to the fund for orphaned children.
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Like adjectives, adverbs are commonly misplaced in everyday speech, and may not cause listeners difficulty. However, such sentences are quite imprecise and, therefore, **should have NO place in your writing.**

**Directions:** Correct any misplaced words in the sentences below, rewriting the sentence so that the misplaced word is next to the word it modifies.

1. I nearly made fifty dollars today.

2. When we opened the leather woman's purse, we found the missing keys.
3. The job scarcely took an hour to complete.
4. I only have five minutes to talk with you.
5. The striking Honda’s paint job made everyone gasp.

**3. Misplaced phrases** may cause a sentence to sound awkward and may create a meaning that does not make sense.

The problem sentences below contain *misplaced phrases* that modify the wrong nouns.

To fix the errors and clarify the meaning, put the phrases *next to* the noun they are supposed to modify.

**Example 1 (a buyer with leather seats?)**

> The dealer sold the Cadillac to the **buyer with leather seats**.

Corrected

> The dealer sold the **Cadillac with leather seats** to the buyer.

**Example 2 (a corner smoking pipes?)**

> The three bankers talked quietly in the **corner smoking pipes**.

Corrected

> The three **bankers smoking pipes** talked quietly in the corner.

**Example 3 (a house made of barbed wire?)**
Directions: Correct any misplaced phrases in the sentences below, rewriting the sentence so that the misplaced phrase is next to the word it modifies.

1. We hiked through the forest wearing only light shirts and shorts.
2. The fans stood in line to buy tickets to the show for twenty minutes.
4. The salesman sold the picture to the short woman in the silver frame.
5. Michelle whistled to the dog on the way to the movies.
6. My friend uses a pen to write his essays with a gold cap.
7. The governor made some remarks about inflation during her news conference.
8. Farmers in Ohio were spraying their crops wearing protective masks.
9. Joe searched for someone to teach him how to play the guitar without success.
10. Ted could see the airplane using binoculars.

4. **Misplaced clauses** may cause a sentence to sound awkward and may create a meaning that does not make sense.

The problem sentences below contain misplaced clauses that modify the wrong nouns.

To fix the errors and clarify the meaning, put the clauses *next to* the noun they are supposed to modify.
Example 1 (a buttered woman?)

The waiter served a dinner roll to the woman that was well buttered.

Corrected

The waiter served a dinner roll that was well buttered to the woman.

Example 2 (a hamper that Ralph wore?)

Ralph piled all of his clothes in the hamper that he had worn.

Corrected

Ralph piled all of his clothes that he had worn in the hamper.

Be careful! In correcting a misplaced modifier, don’t create a sentence with two possible meanings.

Example

The teacher said on Monday she would return our essays.

Problem: Did the teacher say this on Monday or will she return the essays on Monday?)
Correction #1 (meaning the essays will be returned on Monday)

The teacher said she would return our essays on Monday.

Correction #2 (meaning that the teacher spoke on Monday)

On Monday the teacher said she would return our essays.

Directions: Correct any misplaced clauses in the sentences below, rewriting the sentence so that the misplaced clause is next to the word it modifies.

1. We gave the old clothes to a local charity that had been piled up in the basement.
2. We ate Mexican food after the movie that was very spicy.
3. I got a watch for my graduation that has a solar clock.
4. My wife found a photograph in the attic that Smith had given to Jones.
5. The grass was covered by the snow that was creating a lush carpet of green.
6. The terrified patient talked with the doctor who had a terminal disease.
7. I used a pen for the test that contained orange ink.
8. The student pleaded with the instructor who cheated on the test.
9. I returned the tuna to the fish market that was spoiled.
10. Marion received a ticket from the police officer who was speeding.

DANGLING MODIFIERS

A dangling modifier is a phrase or clause that is not clearly and logically related to the word or words it modifies (i.e. is placed next to).
Two notes about dangling modifiers:

- Unlike a misplaced modifier, a dangling modifier cannot be corrected by simply moving it to a different place in a sentence.
- In most cases, the dangling modifier appears at the beginning of the sentence, although it can also come at the end.

Sometimes the dangling modifier error occurs because the sentence fails to specify anything to which the modifier can refer.

Example 1

Looking toward the west, a funnel shaped cloud stirred up dust.

This sentence does not specify who is looking toward the west. In fact, there is nothing at all in the sentence to which the modifying phrase looking toward the west can logically refer. Since the modifier, looking toward the west, is sitting next to the funnel shaped cloud, the sentence suggests that the cloud is doing the looking.

Example 2

When nine years old, my mother enrolled in medical school.

This sentence means that my mother enrolled in medical when she was nine years old!

At other times the dangling modifier is placed next to the wrong noun or noun substitute.

Example 1

Walking to the movies, the cloudburst drenched Jim.

Because of the placement of walking to the movies, this sentence suggests that the cloudburst is walking to the movies even though a possible walker - Jim - is mentioned later.
Example 2

Since *having been fixed the night before* is placed next to *Priscilla*, the sentence means that *Priscilla was fixed the night before*.

As the above examples show, dangling modifiers result in *inaccurate* and sometimes *ludicrous* statements.

**How to correct dangling modifiers**

Dangling modifiers may be corrected in two general ways.

**Correction Method #1**

1. Leave the modifier as it is.
2. Change the main part of the sentence so that it begins with the term *actually modified*.
3. This change will put the modifier next to the term it modifies.

Thus, this dangling modifier

![Diagram](image1)

may be corrected to

![Diagram](image2)

Now the sentence means that *I was looking toward the west*.

Using the same method, this dangling modifier
Now the sentence means that Jim was drenched by the cloudburst.

Directions: Correct any dangling modifiers in the sentences below by keeping the phrase and rewriting the other part of the sentence so that the modifier is positioned next to the word it modifies.

1. Leaving quickly, my car lights were left on.
2. To complete a degree in anthropology, at least two history courses must be taken.
3. Carrying twenty-pound packs on our backs, the trail seemed very difficult.
4. In selecting her next car, cost had to be considered by Linda.
5. Comparing the totals carefully, discrepancies were found by the auditors.
6. While exercising at the gym, my shirt tore.
7. Originally written for children, many adults have been enchanted by Peter Pan.
8. As the senior member present, the control panel was operated by Ms. Patton.
9. Protected by bubble wrap, anyone can ship this lamp anywhere.
10. After assaulting several bystanders, the police captured the criminal.

Correction Method #2

1. Change the dangling modifier phrase to a subordinate clause, creating a subject and verb.
2. Leave the rest of the sentence as it is.
Thus, the dangling modifier

When nine years old, my mother enrolled in medical school.

may be corrected to

When I was nine years old, my mother enrolled in medical school.

Now the sentence means that I (not my mother!) was nine years old when my mother enrolled in medical school.

Using the same method, the dangling modifier

Having been fixed the night before, Priscilla could use the car.

may be corrected to

Since the car had been fixed the night before, Priscilla could use it.

Now the sentence means that the car (not Priscilla!) was fixed.

**Directions:** Correct any dangling modifiers in the sentences below by changing the dangling phrase into a clause with its own subject and predicate.

1. After explaining that I had lost my wallet, the waiter allowed me to pay by check.

2. Driving up the long, tree lined driveway, the mansion loomed above us.

3. Once filled with ink, you can write for hours before the pen runs dry.

4. Having done the dishes and vacuumed the floors, my house looked decent again.
5. Playing football for the first time, the game was too strenuous for Maxwell.

6. Standing on the runway, a plane will hit you.

7. Reading Newsweek, an article on the dangers of ice fishing caught my eye.

8. When just two years old, my mother showed me how to dance the polka.

9. While visiting the reptile house, the crocodile frightened my friends.

10. After showing my ID, the gate opened.

Part I - Misplaced Modifiers

Directions: The sentences below contain misplaced modifiers. Circle the misplaced modifier and draw an arrow to where it belongs in the sentence to convey the intended meaning.

1. A wind blew across the field that was cold and blustery.

2. Joan had made up her mind to be an architect before she was thirteen years old.

3. Fortunately, Mark almost sold all his bronze sculptures.

4. He struck the fish bowl with his forehead, which fortunately was empty.

5. I told Mick when my new computer arrived I would let him surf the internet.

6. We only have three more miles to go before reaching the hotel.

7. Elvis saw a bird sitting on the telephone wire that he could not identify.

8. Throw that spoiled package of meat into the trash can.

9. She found a woolen child’s scarf in the yard.

10 Hung across two poles, I saw a clothesline.

Part II - Dangling Modifiers

Directions: Using either of the two methods explained in the module, rewrite each of the following sentences to correct the dangling modifiers.

1. At the age of ten, my parents took me to Disney World.

2. After finishing the ice arena, it will be opened to the public.

3. While talking, the fire alarm sounded.

4. Getting up early, the house seemed unusually quiet to me.
5. Not being aware of what had happened, the confusion puzzled Jill.

6. Glancing to my left, a fast-flowing stream wound its way through the meadow.

7. Not knowing his way around the campus, it was hard for Jones to find his classrooms.

8. As a budding high school athlete, one of my goals was to be a football hero.

9. My dog slept at my feet while grading papers last night.

10. By writing a letter to the editor, the public will know your views.