Dangling and Misplaced Modifiers


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 *dangling modifier*, which is 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 **misplaced modifier** is 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.

**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.)