

Dangling Or Misplaced Modifiers

A modifier is a word or group of words meant to describe another word in a sentence. For clarity, the modifier or modifying phrase should be placed as close to the word it is modifying as possible.

Placement of the adverbial modifier

Some adverbial modifiers enjoy a loose placement order: only, nearly, almost, and hardly. However, placement of the modifier can change or confuse the meaning of the sentence.

Ex: **Only** I want to ride that horse.

(I am the only one who wants to ride that horse.)

Ex: I **only** want to ride that horse.

(Riding the horse is the only thing I want.)

Ex: I want to ride **only** that horse.

(I want to ride that horse and no other.)

Any one of these sentences is grammatically correct. Nonetheless, the author should choose which meaning he actually intends and proceed accordingly for the clarity of the sentence.

Ex: The friend I have lunch with **occasionally** tells me about his past adventures.

(Do I have lunch with him occasionally, or does he tell me stories occasionally?)

Better: The friend I have lunch with tells me **occasionally** about his past adventures.

Squinting modifier

A squinting modifier is placed between two phrases; it might be describing either one.

Ex: Throw Mama **from the train** a kiss.

(In this sentence, someone is throwing Mama from the train.)

Better: Throw Mama a kiss **from the train**.

Ex: In our tent, **eating the bacon**, was a large racoon.

(Exactly who was eating the bacon.)

Better: A large racoon was in our tent, **eating the bacon**.

Dangling modifier 1

A dangling modifier is a descriptive phrase which is placed too far from the word it is describing for clarity.

Ex: As a child, *her grandmother* took her to various museums.

(This sentence sounds like her grandmother was a child when she took her to various museums which is, of course, impossible.)

Better: *Her grandmother* took her, **as a child**, to various museums.

Ex: Burned to the ground, *I* could not recognize the historic building.

(This sentence actually states that I was burned to the ground, not the building.)

Better: *I* could not recognize the historic building **which was burned to the ground**.

Dangling modifier 2

In the following examples, the modifier or modifying phrase has no clear connection to any word in the main phrase.

Ex: Looking into the car's history, it was obviously much more harshly used than the dealer admitted.

(In this sentence, nobody is actually doing the looking. The modifying phrase should have a subject.)

Better: After looking into the car's history, Rodney realized that it had been much more harshly used than the dealer admitted.

Ex. To become a candidate, nominations must be obtained.

(Again, with this sentence, the modifying phrase has no connection to any word in the main phrase. We do not know who is becoming a candidate or who is obtaining the nominations.)

Better: To become a candidate, Rob knows he must obtain nominations.

References:

Collins, C.E. (1989). *Plain English: A guide to standard usage and clear writing*. Prentice-Hall.

Emery, D.W., Kierzek, D., & Lindblom, P. (2002). *English fundamentals* (12 ed.). Pearson Education.

