

TRoublesome Modifiers Workshop

MISPLACED MODIFIERS

To modify something is to change or alter it in some way. Modifiers in sentences change the meaning of a portion of the sentence or, in some cases, of the entire sentence. Often the change is simply a matter of clarification or amplification. The examples below illustrate some of the uses of modifiers (the modifiers are italicized):

EX:

red book
each of the girls
child who was crying
usually study
usually study hard
plans that always fall apart

In general, a modifier should be placed as close as possible to the part of the sentence it modifies. When a modifier is placed so that it modifies, or seems to modify, the wrong part, an illogical relationship is established. The modifier is said to be misplaced.

Misplaced modifiers can be (1) phrases, (2) clauses, or (3) single words.

MODIFYING PHRASES

A MODIFYING PHRASE is misplaced when it appears to modify a part of the sentence that it cannot logically modify. Study these sentences, which contain misplaced modifiers:

EX:

1. He dated the girl with his work clothes on.
(phrase modifier)----- with his work clothes on
(part that appears to be modified)---- girl
girl with his work clothes on?? (check the logic)

Correction:

With his work clothes on, he dated the girl.

2. He said that he would date the girl two times.
(modifier)----- two times
(part that appears to be modified)--- would date
would date the girl two times??

Correction:

He said two times that he would date the girl.

3. The painting was studied by a man with bright colors.
(modifier) -----with bright colors.
(word it seems to modify) -man
man with bright colors??

Correction:

A painting with bright colors was studied by a man.
A man studied a painting with bright colors.

4. The rattlesnake was seen by the ranger slithering along the roadside.
(modifier) -----slithering along the roadside.
(word it seems to modify)--ranger
ranger slithering along the roadside??

Correction:

The rattlesnake slithering along the road was seen by the ranger.
The ranger saw a rattlesnake slithering along the road.

SQUINTING MODIFIERS

A SQUINTING MODIFIER is a modifier that appears to modify both the word before it and the word after it at the same time (it squints, with one eye looking one way and one looking the other). The sentence below contains an example of a squinting modifier:

EX:

The skater who slipped on the ice suddenly winced with pain.
(modifier)----- suddenly
slipped suddenly?
suddenly winced with pain?

Corrections:

The skater who suddenly slipped on the ice winced with pain.
The skater who slipped on the ice winced suddenly with pain.

MODIFYING CLAUSE

A MODIFYING CLAUSE is misplaced when it appears to modify a part of the sentence that it cannot logically modify. These misplaced modifiers are usually adjective clauses not following the noun or pronoun they are modifying.

EX:

1. It was a book for his sister that he had promised to order.
(modifier) -----that he had promised to order.
(word it seems to modify)-----sister
sister that he had promised to order??

Correction:

It was a book that he had promised to order for his sister.

2. The boy lived in that house that had red hair.
(modifier) -----that had red hair.
(word it seems to modify)--house
house that had red hair.

Correction:

The boy that had red hair lived in that house.

3. She bought new glasses for her near-sighted eyes which were tinted.
(modifier) -----which were tinted.

(word it seems to modify) -----eyes
-----tinted eyes-----??

Correction:

For her near-sighted eyes she bought new glasses which were tinted.

SPLIT INFINITIVES

A SPLIT INFINITIVE occurs when a modifying word or phrase is placed between the *to* and *the verb* in an infinitive phrase. Unless there is no other logical to place that modifying expression, it should not split the infinitive.

EX:

I always try to ever so hard please people I work with.
Ever so hard is splitting the infinitive to please.

Correction:

I always try every so hard to please people I work with.

MISPLACED WORDS

WORDS such as only, nearly, and almost are frequently MISPLACED. Since these expressions are frequently misused in speech, a writer needs to be very aware of placing them immediately before the word they are modifying. A person very skilled with word usage could use situations where these words are misplaced to misconstrue someone's meaning. Note the following example where a slight change in position of the word only changes the meaning of the statement.

EX:

Only Mary heard Bill shouting at the girls. (Mary was the only witness.)
Mary only heard Bill shouting at the girls. (She only heard him; she did not see anything.)
Mary heard only Bill shouting at the girls. (She didn't hear anyone else.)
Mary heard Bill only shouting at the girls. (She didn't hear him beating them.)
Mary heard Bill shouting at the girls only. (He was not shouting at the boys.)

DANGLING MODIFIERS

A DANGLING MODIFIER occurs when a modifier is used to modify a word that is not in the sentence. A writer must rewrite the sentence to correct a dangling modifier.

EX:

Purring happily, the woman spooned out the cat food.
(modifier)-----purring happily
(word it seems to modify)-----the woman

There are two common ways to fix a dangling modifier. One way is to change the phrase to a dependent clause containing its own subject. The example a below illustrates this process. The second most common way to correct this type of error, illustrated in b below, is to change the subject of the sentence so that it can supply the action for the main sentence as well as for the phrase. A third less common method is simply to add an actor to the dangling phrase and create an absolute phrase as is illustrated in example c above.

Correction:

- a. As the cat purred happily, the woman spooned out the cat food. (Dependent clause)
- b. Purring happily, the cat ate the food spooned out by the woman. (Changed subject)
- c. The cat purring happily, the woman spooned out the cat food. (Absolute phrase)

Often constructions containing PASSIVE VERBS create a natural environment for a dangling modifier. Remember that the passive voice occurs when the actor moves from the subject to the object of the proposition by where it is sometimes understood and the *to be* verb is used with the past participle form of the verb.

EX:

The ball was thrown by John. (John is the actor of the sentence.)

Rice is grown in India. (By someone supplies the understood actor. It is not as important as the rice, so it is left understood.)

The following is a dangling modifier that grows as a result of the passive voice. The sentence can be corrected simply by changing the passive voice to the active voice, thus restoring the actor for both constructions and creating a much stronger sentence.

EX:

Traveling through New Mexico, many rabbits were seen.

Correction:

Traveling through New Mexico, we saw many rabbits.

Other dangling modifiers occur when a writer tries to create short phrases that have lost too much information. Often these phrases are or contain verbal phrases that begin the sentence. Look at the subject for the actor. If it doesn't fit, the sentence is faulty.

EX:

When seventeen, my family moved to California. (Did the family move when the family was seventeen? Of course, this is not logical.)

Correction:

When I was seventeen, my family moved to California.

EX:

To get the most out of the party, the refreshments were prepared beforehand. (Will the refreshments get the most out of the party?)

Correction:

For everyone to get the most from the party, the hostess prepared the refreshments beforehand.

PARALLELISM

A careful writer should also consider PARALLELISM anytime items are compounded into two or more equal parts. When items are joined with coordinating conjunctions (*and, but, or, nor, so, for, yet*), the items joined should be the same grammatical construction. An easy way to check for parallel constructions is to find the conjunction and commas (if there are more than two items listed) and determine what words are listed. Then determine whether these words are grammatically equal.

EX:

Mr. Smith is a man with honesty, integrity, and works hard. (Honesty and integrity are both nouns, but works hard is a verb plus an adverb.)

Correction:

Mr. Smith is a man with honesty, integrity, and industry. (Industry is a third noun. The items are now parallel.)

EX:

Mary is a woman with a good mind and who is always willing to help. (With a good mind is a prepositional phrase, and who is always willing to help is a dependent clause.)

Correction:

Mary is a woman who has a good mind and who is always willing to help. (Two dependent clauses are used.)

CORRELATIVE CONJUNCTIONS often create an environment for faulty parallelism. However, a writer can check very easily simply by finding the words that are joined by the conjunctions. Correlative conjunctions are conjunctions used in pairs: *either. . . or, neither. . . nor, whether. . . or, not only . . . but also, both. . . and.*

EX:

Susan hopes to either be a doctor or a lawyer. (The constructions joined here are be a doctor and a lawyer.)

Correction:

Susan hopes to be either a doctor or a lawyer. (The word either has been moved so only doctor and lawyer are included.)

FAULTY COMPARISON

Another common error in writing occurs when FAULTY COMPARISON takes place. The following illustrates errors to avoid.

EX:

Matthew has arms and legs as skinny as a grasshopper. (Don't compare Matthew's arms and legs to a grasshopper. Rather, compare them to the arms and legs of a grasshopper.)

Correction:

He has arms and legs as skinny as those of a grasshopper. (Those refer to the arms and legs.)

EX:

Mark is taller than any boy in his class. (Taller is a comparative form used to compare two. Also, he is a member of the class; therefore he is not taller than himself.)

Correction:

Mark is taller than any other boy in his class. (Supply two items for comparison.)

-OR-

Mark is the tallest boy in his class. (Tallest is the superlative form used for comparing more than two.)

Mark is the tallest of any other boy in his class. (When the superlative is followed by *of*, the object of *of* must be plural.)

Correction:

Mark is the tallest boy in his class.

Mark is taller than any other boy in his class. (See explanation #2)