

MODIFIERS: FORM AND POSITION

Modifiers are words and phrases that flesh out sentence patterns. The basic patterns can give us a bare-bones statement: "The bird sang." Modifiers help answer additional questions like

"What kind? How? When? Where? Why?"

1. Single-word modifiers are of two types. **Adjectives** have their most common position before a noun to tell us "What kind?"; a *straight* answer, a *wonderful* party, a *huge* debt, a *green* thumb, an *unforgettable* performance. They also appear after linking verbs. These are *be* (*am, is, are, was, were*) and verbs that tell us how things appear to our senses. The waves were high. (*high* waves) His voice sounded hoarse. (*a hoarse* voice) The bottle is empty. (*an empty* bottle) The milk tasted so. (*sour* milk) The grass looked green. (*green* grass) The water seemed cold. (*cold*-water)

Adverbs have their most common position after action verbs to tell us how something is done: sang *sweetly*, answered *eagerly*, ate *rapidly*, fought *desperately*, asked *timidly*. Most adverbs simply add the *-ly* ending to an adjective. But not all do: "A good musician plays *well*." Notice that we use adverbs before another modifier to answer questions like "How much?" or "To what extent?"

Adverb + Adjective: We had a *surprisingly large* crowd.

Adverb + Adverb: I knew him *fairly well*.

Formal written English requires a more frequent use of distinctive adverb forms than everyday conversation; sang *loudly*, drove *slowly*, aged *considerably*, stepped *carefully*.

Faulty: He plays the piano very *good*.

Revised: He plays the piano very *well*.

Faulty: He still speaks English very *bad*.

Revised: He still speaks English very *badly*.

Informal English uses *real, awful, pretty, mighty, and plenty* as intensifiers preceding other modifiers. In formal written English substitute *very, fairly, or extremely*.

Informal: Joan has become *real* popular.

Formal: Joan has become *very* popular.

Informal: We had a *pretty good* team this year.

Formal: We had a *fairly good* team this year.

2. Modifiers modify different things depending on their position in a sentence. "I asked *only* my aunt for a loan" means that you asked nobody besides your aunt. "I asked my aunt for a loan *only*" means that you did not ask for a gift. One type of easily misplaced modifier is the **prepositional phrase** (*in a hurry, on the spot, with regret, by accident, at the station*).

Misplaced: He slit open the trout he had caught *with a knife*. (Caught with a knife?)

Revised: *With a knife*, he slit open the trout he had caught. (Slit with a knife.)

Dangling: *At the age of nine*, my grandmother visited us. (A none-year-old grandmother?)

Revised: When *I* was nine years old, my grandmother visited us.

3. Modifiers may be **verbals** like *smiling* or *to smile*. You then have to show who does the smiling: Smiling proudly, *she* showed us the letter.

Satisfactory: *Singing*, the campers put up their tents.

Misplaced: *Singing*, the tents were put up by the campers. (singing tents?)

Dangling: *Singing*, the tents were put us. (Who was singing?)

Verbals combine with other material in a **verbal phrase**. Like a verbal standing by itself, a verbal phrase needs to point clearly to what it is supposed to modify.

Dangling: *To obtain good grades*, hard work is essential. (Who obtains good grades?)

Revised: *To obtain good grades*, a student must work hard.

EXERCISE

Mark sentences **S** (for satisfactory) or **U** (for unsatisfactory) in the box to the right.

1. Falling from the slippery roof, he hurt himself badly. _____
2. As the questions continued, the lecturer sounded more and more impatient. _____
3. The characters in many current movies speak and act fairly realistic. _____
4. The interview with the star of the show proved real disappointing. _____
5. Most drivers drive too careless most of the time. _____
6. The director stubbornly insisted on using a real lion. _____
7. We had the car fixed, but the engine still does not run good. _____
8. We easily talked the man into giving us a real bargain. _____
9. The plans looked beautiful on paper, but progress has been awful slow. _____
10. The downtown area has changed considerably. _____

EXERCISE

B. Mark sentences **S** (for satisfactory), **DM** (unsatisfactory because of a dangling modifier), or **MM** (unsatisfactory because of a misplaced modifier).

11. The island had a museum for tourists with shrunken heads. _____
12. Being a normal youth, I was bored by domestic chores. _____
13. Hope and doubt are the emotions one feels when answering the phone. _____
14. While walking on concrete, the clicking of shoes is very audible. _____

15. When taking a bath, a radio should never be left close to the tub. ____ ____
16. By assigning question-and-answer problems, students are not asked to think. ____ ____
17. Having grown up in a mining town, my mother never liked the big city. ____ ____
18. The picture was described as the best ever painted by my art teacher. ____ ____
19. The escaped lion was captured before anyone was injured by its keepers. ____ ____
20. By glancing over the magazine rack in any drugstore, many magazines can be classified as men's magazines or women's magazines. ____ ____