

Dangling and Misplaced Modifiers

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Definitions

- A **modifier** is a word or a word group that makes the meaning of another word or word group clearer, more specific.
 - **Yawning sleepily**, my puppy curled up in my lap to take a nap. (“Yawning sleepily” modifies [clarifies/specifies the meaning of] the word “puppy.”)
- A **dangling modifier** is a word or a word group that does not clearly and sensibly modify a word or a word group.
- A **misplaced modifier** is a word or a word group that is placed far from the word(s) it modifies, muddling the meaning of the sentence.

Dangling Modifiers

- Two of the most often misused constructs, as far as modifiers are concerned, are the verbal phrase and the elliptical clauses (Butler et al. 205).
- A verbal phrase is a group of words in which the verb dominates.
 - **playing** the piano, **to count** to ten, by **altering** the landscape, etc.
- An elliptical phrase is a group of words from which one or more words have been removed because it (they) is (are) understood from the meaning of the sentence.
 - **When growing up**, Sarah loved ice cream. (“she was” or “Sarah was” is omitted from the first part of the sentence because it is understood from the second part).

Dangling Modifiers cont.

- The missing words often result in some rather amusing, albeit incorrect, sentences:
 - *Reading the newspaper, the sleepy puppy curled up in my lap.
(According to this sentence, the sleepy puppy was reading the newspaper.)
 - Possible correction:
As I was reading the newspaper, the sleepy puppy curled up in my lap. (Now it is clear who was doing what.)

More Examples of Dangling Modifiers

- *To read with ease, the letter size must be increased. (According to this sentence, the letter size is trying to read with ease.)
Possible solution: To read with ease, Dana must increase the letter size.
- *By singing loudly, the beavers got scared. (According to this sentence, the beavers were singing loudly.)
Possible solution: By singing loudly, Dave scared the beavers.
- *Wrapped around the fence post, the farmer removed the encroaching ivy. (According to this sentence, the farmer was wrapped around the fence post.)
- Possible solution: The farmer removed the encroaching ivy that was wrapped around the fence post.

Misplaced Modifiers

- **Misplaced relative clauses** (clauses that begin with relative pronouns, such as *who*, *which*, and *that*).
 - *The proposal was passed into law **that restricted the distribution of plastic bags in grocery stores**.
 - Possible solution: The proposal **that restricted the distribution of plastic bags in grocery stores** was passed into law.
 - *Students were asked multiple questions **who were waiting for their instructors**.
 - Possible solution: Students **who were waiting for their instructor** were asked multiple questions.

Misplaced Modifiers cont.

- Sometimes modifiers happen to fall in a position where they can modify two sentence elements, making the sentence ambiguous.
 - The singer mastered the difficult aria that Verdi composed **in the later years of his life**. (Because the modifier can refer to both “mastered” and “composed,” it is unclear which action was undertaken in the later years of life.)
 - Possible solution (depending on what we are trying to say):
 - **In the later years of his life**, the singer mastered the aria that Verdi composed.
 - A few students were told that they had been suspended **by the principal**. (Were the students told or suspended by the principal?)
 - Possible solution (depending on what we are trying to say):
 - A few students were told **by the principal** that they had been suspended.
 - A few students were told that the principal had suspended them.

Misplaced Modifiers cont.

Some modifiers are especially prone to be misplaced:

only	almost	even	hardly
just	merely	simply	nearly

- Sue **only** ate vegetables for six months. (The sentence means that Sue ate, but did not, for example, grew, vegetables for six months.)
- If you wish to say that Sue ate nothing else but vegetables, then say
Sue ate **only** vegetables for six months.

Misplaced Modifiers cont.

- Even though we call this error “misplaced modifier,” is it really “misplaced”? The answer depends on what you are trying to express: (Always place the modifier next to or very close to the word(s) it modifies!)
- 1. Only I saw the debate between Adam and Chris. (I was the only one who saw the debate.)
- 2. I only saw the debate between Adam and Chris. (I saw but did not, for example, comprehend the debate.)
- 3. I saw only the debate between Adam and Chris. (I saw nothing else but the debate. I did not see the ensuing fight, for example.)
- 4. I saw the debate only between Adam and Chris. (Others were debating as well, but the only one I saw was between Adam and Chris.)
- 5. I saw the debate between only Adam and Chris. (Same as above.)

Work Cited

Butler, Eugenia, Mary Ann Hickman, Patricia J. McAlexander, and Lalla Overby. *Correct Writing*. 6th ed. Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath, 1995. Print.