

Description

A *modifier* is any word or group of words that describe or qualify the meaning of other parts of a sentence. When used correctly, a modifier can inform and clarify. However, when used out of place, these modifiers are known as *misplaced* or *dangling*, and can often cause confusion and unintended amusement. For example:

After declining for several quarters, Steve tried a new tactic to increase sales.

Clearly, this sentence intended to describe sales as declining, not Steve.

Witnesses reported seeing a woman driving the getaway car with flowing red hair.

Similarly, the flowing red hair belonged to the woman, not the vehicle. Misplaced modifiers are easily fixed by flipping the sentence structure around to make the doer of the action the subject of the sentence:

Steve tried a new tactic to increase sales after they had been declining for several quarters.

Witnesses reported that a woman with flowing red hair was seen driving the getaway car.

Limiting Modifiers

Words that are intended to limit the sentence like *only*, *almost*, *even*, *hardly*, and *nearly*—can often cause the biggest misplacement problems resulting in the sentence becoming limited in the wrong way:

David has nearly destroyed every computer he has ever owned.

On the basis of this sentence structure, David should be very grateful that he's never *actually* destroyed any computers, only *nearly* destroyed them. Clearly, the intended limit here was *nearly every computer*. In order to avoid such errors from being made, make sure that the limiting modifier is placed in front of the word (or words) being modified.

Dangling Modifiers

As the term implies, the worst errors occur when the placement between the descriptive phrase and the noun is so far apart that the modifier appears to be left hanging in mid-air, or the descriptor is left with no noun to describe at all:

With long ears dragging on the floor, Susan wondered how the dog could walk without

tripping over.

The description of *long ears* is placed too far away in the sentence to be logical. Again, making the doer of the action (Susan doing the wondering) the subject of the sentence easily fixes the problem:

Susan wondered how the dog could walk without tripping over its long ears dragging on the floor.

Read What You Write

Modifier errors typically occur as a result of writing too quickly and not checking your work with a fresh perspective. Although your work may make perfect sense to you, it might end up looking completely ridiculous to the reader because they are seeing the words for the first time. Re-examining your work with a fresh outlook will help in identifying these misplaced modifiers.

Category

1. Language & Grammar
2. Reporting Research

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