



Dangling, Misplaced, and Squinting Modifiers

A modifier is a word, phrase, or clause that changes the meaning of another word in a sentence. Proper placement of modifiers is crucial for clarity in meaning. Improperly placed modifiers can cause confusion, or even amusement, in the reader. **The key is to place modifiers as close as possible to the words they modify.** There are three main types of inappropriately placed modifiers: dangling, misplaced, and squinting.

A **dangling modifier** has nothing to modify.

INCORRECT Ex. **Hungry**, the hamburger was devoured in seconds.

Who or what is hungry? According to this sentence, the hamburger is. Because this is impossible, the sentence has a dangling modifier. The real subject of the sentence is missing.

CORRECT Ex. Hungry, Madison devoured the hamburger in seconds.

Now, the modifier (hungry) is next to the true subject of the sentence, Madison.

INCORRECT Ex. **Having finished the last question**, the test was turned in.

Who finished the last question? According to this sentence, the test did. Because this is impossible, the sentence has a dangling modifier. Again, the subject is missing.

CORRECT Ex. Having finished the last question, Joe turned in the test.

Now, the modifier is next to the true subject of the sentence, Joe.

INCORRECT Ex. The meal was a disaster, **not having read the recipe correctly.**

Who failed to read the recipe correctly? In this sentence, it is impossible to tell.

CORRECT Ex. Because I did not read the recipe correctly, the meal was a disaster.

Sometimes, to correct a dangling modifier, the writer must change the structure of the sentence.

A **misplaced modifier** is too far away from the word it modifies.

INCORRECT Ex. She **barely** threw the ball one yard.

Here, it is not clear what the modifier, barely, is modifying. How does one barely throw?

CORRECT Ex. She threw the ball barely one yard.

Now, barely modifies the distance the ball was thrown, and the meaning of the sentence is clear.



INCORRECT Ex. **Covered with whipped cream**, my husband loves chocolate sundaes.

Here, it sounds like the husband is covered in whipped cream.

CORRECT Ex. My husband loves chocolate sundaes covered with whipped cream.

Now, with the modifier closer to what it modifies, the meaning of the sentence is clear.

INCORRECT Ex. Steve bought a used car from a salesperson **with a broken tailpipe**.

Here it sounds like the salesperson has a broken tailpipe.

CORRECT Ex. Steve bought a used car with a broken tailpipe from a salesperson.

A **squinting modifier** can cause the meaning of a sentence to be ambiguous, or unclear.

INCORRECT Ex. Students who attend office hours **often** can perform better on tests.

In this sentence, do the students attend office hours frequently or can they frequently perform better on tests by attending office hours? The meaning is unclear because the adverb is “squinting” or looking both ways.

CORRECT Ex. Students who often attend office hours can perform better on tests.

CORRECT Ex. Students who attend office hours can often perform better on tests.

In these two sentences, the meaning is much clearer.

To make your writing clearer, take care with your placement of modifiers.

