

Course: Written expression

Level: 2nd year LMD.

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Placement of modifiers

Modifiers represent elements like words, phrases, or clauses that modify and clarify other words, phrases, or clauses. The basic modifier is an *adjective* or an *adverb*. Besides, modifiers can be a *phrase* or *clause* acting as an adjective or adverb. We can modify a word or group of words by describing another word and making its meaning more specific. Often, modifying phrases works best when it is right next to the word it modifies.

1. Misplaced Modifiers

A **misplaced modifier** appears to modify the wrong word or group of words i.e. the modifier is put in the wrong place. The writer can confuse the reader by displacing a modifier in a sentence. Be sure to place modifiers in the right position so that a reader will be able to identify the word or words they modify.

Rule 1: Misplaced adjectives

Place the adjective as close as possible to the word it modifies.

Example

- On the way to the store, I found a red woman's wallet.
On the way to the store, I found a woman's **red wallet**. (adj+ noun)

Rule 2: Misplaced adverbs

Place limiting modifiers "adverbs" carefully.

Example

- I will go **only** if he asks me. (otherwise, I will stay)
- I will go if he **only** asks me. (please ask me "he").
- I will go if he asks **only** me. (the others stay)
- 🚩 **N.B:** words such as only, hardly, just, nearly, almost, and even can function in the position and change the meaning of the sentence. So, place them carefully with the intended meaning.

Rule 3: Misplaced phrases

Place the prepositional phrase close to the word it modifies.

Example

- The woman cashed the cheque with a French accent.
The women with a French accent cashed the cheque. (noun+ prep phrase).

Rule 4: Misplaced clauses

Place the modifier (dependent clause) as close as possible to the word it modifies.

Example

- He sold **the article** to a magazine publisher **that** he worked on for six months.
He sold **the article that he worked on it for six months** to a magazine publisher.
(noun+ adj clause)

2. Dangling Modifiers

A dangling modifier is a phrase or clause which does not sensibly relate to any word in the sentence or it does modify the wrong word. There are four types of dangling modifiers.

Rule 1: Dangling modifier as a participle phrase (it starts with a past or present participle)

Example

- **Walking through the supermarket**, the oranges looked tempting.

To correct it, provide the subject of the main clause or rewrite the modifier as a complete clause including subject+ verb.

- ✓ When **I was walking** through the supermarket, the oranges looked tempting.
- ✓ Walking through the supermarket, **I noticed** the oranges looked tempting.

Rule 2: Dangling modifier as a gerund phrase

Example

- After recovering from the treatment, my doctor advised me to be more careful in the future.
 - ✓ After **I recovered** from the treatment, my doctor advised me to be more careful in the future.
 - ✓ After recovering from the treatment, **I was** advised by my doctor to be more careful in the future.

Rule 3: Dangling modifier as an infinitive phrase (to + stem)

Example

- To understand world affairs, daily newspapers should be read.
 - ✓ To understand world affairs, **you** should read daily newspapers.
 - ✓ If **you want** to understand world affairs, daily newspapers should be read.

Rule 4: Dangling elliptical clause (something missing)

Example: S &V

- While student at Rutgers, Shakespeare was my favorite.
 - ✓ While **I was** a student at Rutgers, Shakespeare was my favorite.

3. Squinting Modifiers

Squinting modifier (adverb) can seem to modify either the word preceding it or the word following it i.e. the modifier is placed in a confusing position that does not indicate clearly whether this modifier modifies the preceding or the following element. To correct it, change the place of the modifier or reword the sentence to clarify the meaning.

Example

- Listening to loud music **slowly** gives me a headache.
 - ✓ When I listen to loud music, I **slowly** develop a headache. “Rewording”
- Cycling up hills **quickly** strengthens your quadriceps.
 - ✓ Cycling up hills strengthens your quadriceps **quickly**. “Reposition”.

4. Split infinitives

Split infinitives are when putting an adverb with or adverb phrase between “to” and its “stem” to emphasize the meaning. Moreover, Split infinitives are found when they give an awkward meaning represented in a long series of adverbs or adverbial phrases between “to” and its “stem”. To correct it, the adverbs are moved either before or usually after the infinitive.

Example 1

- When the locus descended, the prairies’ residents prepared to **hurriedly** depart
 - ✓ When the locus descended, the prairies’ residents **hurriedly** prepared to depart.

Example 2

- They accepted to **quickly** and **quietly** leave the meeting.
 - ✓ They accepted to leave the meeting **quickly** and **quietly**.

5. Lengthy Modifiers

Rule 1: Avoid writing lengthy modifiers between the subject and the predicate.

Example:

- The cost of attending college, because of inflation and reduced federal support, has risen sharply in recent years.
 - ✓ Because of inflation and reduced federal support, the cost of attending college has risen sharply in recent years. (because + s + v)
 - ✓ S + V + because.
 - ✓ S + Adv (short modifier) + V.

Rule 2: Avoid writing lengthy modifiers between the verb and its complement.

- The winning grand prix driver seemed, to the surprise of the fans, unhappy.
 - ✓ To the fans of the surprise of the fans, the winning grand prix driver seemed unhappy.
 - ✓ The winning grand prix driver seemed unhappy.

- ✓ The winning grand prix driver seemed **terribly** unhappy. Short modifier (single word).

Rule 3: avoid placing a lengthy modifier within a verb phrase.

- He discovered he had been, by all his relative and friends, deserted.
 - ✓ He discovered he had been deserted by all his relative and friends.
 - ✓ He discovered he had been completely deserted.