

Misplaced, Dangling, and Unclear Modifiers: Our Most Dangerous Grammatical Foe... (A guide for teachers)

Modifier: A Definition

“Modifiers” are interesting because we don’t tend to notice them unless we make a mistake with them. A **modifier** is a phrase or word meant to describe or explain part of a sentence.

A modifier can be a word. Notice the following sentences, where “carefully” is the modifier”...

We paddled down the river carefully
We carefully paddled down the river
Carefully, we paddled down the river.

It can also be a phrase. Notice the following sentences where “Every evening from 6:00-7:00 “ is the modifier.

Every evening from 6:00-7:00, our favorite watering hole holds happy hour.
Our favorite watering hole holds happy hour every evening from 6:00-7:00.

Why it is important to improve and address misused modifiers

They can change, confuse, or otherwise affect the meaning of a sentence. Look at the following traffic accident reports, for an example...

I was on my way to the doctor with rear end trouble when my universal joint gave way causing me to have an accident.

Does the person have “rear end trouble”
Did the “universal joint” give way on his body or his car?
Did the accident occur with the car or with the person’s bodily functions?

The unclear modifier doesn’t logically let the reader know that it is modifying the car, rather than the driver (OK, we hope it is modifying the car...)

I was thrown from my car as it left the road, and was later found in a ditch by some stray cows.

Did the stray cows find him and call 911?
Or was he found near some stray cows?

In attempting to kill a fly, I drove into a telephone pole.

Did he hit the telephone pole in order to kill a fly?

Again, in each of these, the modifier is unclear.

The Basic Types of Misused Modifiers

Misplaced Words

Problem: The modifier is too far away from the word it modifies.

Solution: move the word

Vikings wide-receiver Randy Moss has nearly frustrated all the coaches he has played for during his entire career.

Vikings wide-receiver Randy Moss has frustrated nearly all the coaches he has played for during his entire career.

The modifier “nearly” is placed closer to the modified “coaches”

Misplaced Phrases and Clauses

The same as misplaced words, only with phrases.

Problem: The modifier is too far away from the word it modifies.

Solution: move the phrase/clause to a more logical place

I heard that she was planning on marrying him while I was listening below her window.

While I was listening below her window, I heard that she was planning on marrying him.

Squinting Modifiers

Problem: An ambiguous modifier that can modify a word before it or after it.

Solution: Define what word it is modifying

Doing squats correctly builds your muscles

(Does it refer to “doing squats correctly” or “correctly building muscles.”)

Doing squats correctly WILL build your muscles.

Dangling Modifiers

The monarch of all misused modifiers. In a ‘dangling modifier’ the modifier modifies either no word or the wrong word. For example:

No Word

Oops: Trained in physics, it is natural to be good at math.

Better: Since he was trained in physics, it is natural that he is good at math.
Trained in physics, it is natural that I am good at math.

The introductory phrase (“trained in...”) is meant to modify a person, but the subject is missing

Wrong Word

Oops: While driving on Greenwood Avenue yesterday afternoon, a tree began to fall toward Wendy H's car.

Better: While Wendy H was driving on Greenwood Avenue yesterday afternoon, a tree began to fall toward her car.