

# Dangling and Misplaced Modifiers

A Guide to Identifying and Fixing  
Them

# What are modifiers?

- Modifiers are words or groups of words that describe, limit, or modify other words or groups of words in a sentence. In the following sentences, the modifiers are underlined.
- I saw a red car.
- He read carefully.
- Running as fast as he could, Bill scored the winning run.

# Benefits of Modifiers

- Modifiers make for more precise writing
- Modifiers make for more interesting writing
- Modifiers make for more descriptive writing
- Modifiers help us achieve our word count (just kidding)

# Dangling Modifiers

- We run into trouble when we dangle our modifiers
- By rule, modifiers must modify the closest word or group of words in a sentence
- Dangling modifiers always involve introductory modifying clauses and phrases—those that come at the beginning of a sentence, before the main independent clause
- Dangling modifiers occur because the word or group of words that was meant to be modified was left out of the sentence
- Because the word or group of words it was meant to modify is not in the sentence, the poor introductory modifier must grab the nearest word and modify it (or “dangle”)
- Because it was not meant to modify that word or group of words, we have a sentence that does not mean what we wanted it to mean—or, as we like to call it, “a train wreck.”

# Visual Representation of a Dangling Modifier



# Example

- Driving on the Park Road at dusk, grizzly bears are foraging for food.
  - Are the grizzly bears driving on the Park Road? Probably not, but that is what this sentence says. Note that there is nothing in this sentence capable of “driving on the Park Road.” An important word or group of words has been left out of the sentence.

# Another Example

- Topped with hot fudge sauce, my date could not believe that I ate the whole thing.  
→ Is “my date” topped with hot fudge sauce? Probably not, but that’s what this sentence says. Again, something important has been left out of the sentence, and the poor introductory modifier must grab the closest word, which it was NOT meant to modify.

# Contrast!

**Your English professor when you have dangling modifiers in your essay:**



**Your English professor when you have no dangling modifiers in your essay:**





Which one would you  
rather have grading  
your essay?

# Misplaced Modifiers

- Misplaced modifiers are different from dangling modifiers in that nothing has been left out of the sentence
- With misplaced modifiers, the modifier is simply in the wrong place, modifying the wrong word or group of words
- The result, however, is the same: a sentence that does not say what we wanted it to say

# Visual Representation of a Misplaced Modifier:



# Example

- Every Friday, the cafeteria serves pizza to students on paper plates.
  - Are the students on paper plates? That's what this sentence says because the modifying phrase "on paper plates" comes immediately after "students." It was probably meant to modify "pizza," but it cannot because it is too far away in the sentence.

# Another Example

- I placed the chair in the corner of the room that I had recently purchased.

→ Did you recently purchase the room?

Probably not, but that's what this sentence says.

The modifying clause “that I had recently purchased” was probably meant to modify “chair,” but it cannot because of its careless placement in the sentence. It must modify “room” because it immediately follows “room.”

# Placement of Limiting Modifiers

- We must be even more careful when placing limiting modifiers like “only.” The following three sentences all include the limiting modifier “only.” Note how its placement changes the meaning of each sentence:
  1. Only literature professors read *Moby-Dick*.
  2. Literature professors read only *Moby-Dick*.
  3. Literature professors only read *Moby-Dick*.

# Answers:

- In the first sentence, “only” must modify “literature professors.” This sentence means that literature professors are the only people who read *Moby-Dick*.
- In the second sentence, “only” must modify *Moby-Dick*. This sentence means that literature professors read nothing but *Moby-Dick*: they don’t read *Popular Mechanics* or *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, for example.
- In the third sentence, “only” must modify “read.” This sentence means that literature professors do not talk or write about *Moby-Dick*; they just read it.



## **Very Sad English Professor**

Here is a picture of your English professor when you have misplaced modifiers in your essays.





### **Very Happy English Professor**

Here is a picture of your English professor when you do not have any misplaced modifiers in your essays.

Which one would you  
rather have grading  
your essay?

# Still Confused?

- Come to the Success Center for more help
- See our friendly and helpful tutors!
- We have hand-outs, too!
- Peruse our vast collection of grammar books!
- Or simply soak up the scholarly ambiance!

# Contrast!

**Students Who Got Help at the Success Center!**



**Student Who Did Not Get Help at the Success Center!**



Please Drop By! We have lots of helping hands . . .

