

Avoiding Misplaced Modifiers, Dangling Modifiers, and Split Infinitives

A modifier is a phrase in a sentence that provides additional information about another element of the sentence.

KEY POINTS

- The rule for using modifiers at the beginning of a sentence is that the word or phrase being modified should immediately follow the modifier.
- A dangling modifier is a modifier whose referent is either unclear or missing altogether.
- A misplaced modifier is a modifier whose referent is present and accounted for, but is out of place within the sentence, and thus seems to modify another referent in the sentence. This results in ambiguity and confusion.
- A squinting modifier is placed right next to the word to which it refers, but is also near another word that it might be modifying. This can cause confusion for the reader.

TERMS

- dangling modifier
A dangling modifier (a specific case of which is the dangling participle) is an error in sentence structure whereby a grammatical modifier is associated with a word other than the one intended, or with no particular word at all.
- modifier
A word, phrase, or clause that limits or qualifies the sense of another word or phrase.

EXAMPLES

- Here's an example of a dangling modifier: Strolling through the park, the squirrels lunged at our ankles. The correct sentence is: As we strolled through the park, squirrels lunged at our ankles .
- Here's an example of a misplaced modifier: Peter ate the pie sitting on the windowsill. The correct sentence is: Peter ate the pie that was sitting on the windowsill.
- Squinting modifier: Stirring the batter slowly blends the ingredients best.
- Corrected: Slowly stirring the batter blends the ingredients best.
- Corrected: To slowly blend ingredients, stirring works best.

Give us feedback on this content: [Edit this content directly](#)

Modifiers

A modifier is a phrase in a sentence that provides additional information about another element of the sentence. For example:

—Responsible for representing students to the faculty and administration and overseeing student organizations, the Student Council plays an important role in campus life. (The modifying phrase provides additional information about the subject of the sentence: the Student Council.)

—An example of bottom-of-the-pyramid targeting, microcredit ventures lend small amounts of money to those with minimal assets. (The modifying phrase modifies "microcredit ventures. ")

—Starving after her morning workout, Jamie ate three bagels. (The modifying phrase modifies "Jamie. ")

Dangling Modifiers

A dangling modifier is a modifying phrase that, due to its location in a sentence, seems to modify a sentence element that it was not intended to modify. For example:

—After completing the experiment, the most bacteria appeared in the scraping taken from the drinking fountain. (Due to proximity, the modifying phrase seems to modify "bacteria," which doesn't make much sense!)

Most dangling modifiers can be fixed by instead placing the modifying phrase next to the element of the sentence that it is intended to modify:

—Dangling: Covering most of Minnesota, the illustration showed the glacier that left the state with its thousands of lakes.

—Corrected: Covering most of Minnesota, the glacier left the state with its thousands of lakes, as depicted on the illustration.

—Dangling: Trekking across the desert, fierce winds swirled around the riders.

—Corrected: Fierce winds swirled around the riders as they trekked across the desert.

Misplaced Modifiers

Similar to a dangling modifier, a misplaced modifier is a modifying phrase, the intended referent of which is ambiguous due to its location in the sentence. For example:

—Erik couldn't ride his bicycle with a broken leg.

—The little girl walked the dog wearing a tutu.

—Just don't stand there!

As with dangling modifiers, misplaced modifiers can often be corrected by rearranging the sentence:

—With his broken leg, Erik couldn't ride his bicycle.

—Still wearing a tutu, the little girl walked the dog.

—Don't just stand there!

Squinting Modifiers

A squinting modifier is a modifier that is placed right next to the word it refers to, but is also near another word that it might be modifying, which causes confusion:

—Cycling uphill quickly strengthens the leg muscles. (Wherein, based on its placement, "quickly" could modify either "cycling uphill" or "strengthens the leg muscles.")

—Using modifiers clearly will improve your writing.

Squinting modifiers can also be corrected by rearranging the sentence:

—Quickly cycling uphill strengthens the leg muscles.

Or: Cycling uphill can quickly strengthen the leg muscles.

—Clearly using modifiers will improve your writing.

Or: Using modifiers will clearly improve your writing.



Statue of a Man Dangling from a Roof in Prague

To avoid dangling and misplaced modifiers in your writing, make sure the entity being modified appears immediately after the modifier.



Trekking across the desert, fierce winds swirled around the riders.

The title of this image is an example of a sentence that contains a dangling modifier, because it is unclear whether the fierce winds trekked across the desert or the riders. A corrected version would be, "Fierce winds swirled around the riders as they trekked across the desert. "