

CHAPTER 21

Misplaced and Dangling Modifiers

In reading a sentence in English, we depend principally on the arrangement of the words to tell us how they are related. In writing, we may create confusion if we fail to connect modifiers to the words they modify.

Note Grammar and style checkers cannot recognize most problems with modifiers. For instance, a checker failed to flag the misplaced modifiers in *Gasoline high prices affect usually car sales* or the dangling modifier in *The vandalism was visible passing the building*.

Misplaced Modifiers

A modifier is **misplaced** if readers can't easily relate it to the word it modifies. Misplaced modifiers may be awkward, confusing, or even unintentionally funny.

Place modifiers where they will clearly modify the words intended.

Readers tend to link a modifying word, phrase, or clause to the nearest word it could modify: *I saw a man in a green hat*. Thus the writer must place the phrase so that it clearly modifies the intended word and not some other.

Confusing He served steak to the men on paper plates.

Revised He served the men steak on paper plates.

Confusing Many dogs are killed by automobiles and trucks roaming unleashed.

Revised Many dogs roaming unleashed are killed by automobiles and trucks.

Confusing This is the only chocolate chip cookie in a bag that tastes like Mom's. [Actual advertisement.]

Revised This is the only bagged [or packaged] chocolate chip cookie that tastes like Mom's.

EXERCISE 21.1 Revising: Misplaced phrases and clauses

Revise the following sentences so that phrases and clauses clearly modify the appropriate words. (You can do this exercise online at ablongman.com/littlebrown.)

Example:

I came to enjoy flying over time.
Over time I came to enjoy flying.

1. Women have contributed much to knowledge and culture of great value.
2. Emma Willard founded the Troy Female Seminary, the first institution to provide a college-level education for women in 1821.
3. Sixteen years later Mary Lyon founded Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, the first true women's college with directors and a campus who would sustain the college even after Lyon's death.

4. *Una* was the first US newspaper, which was founded by Pauline Wright Davis in 1853, that was dedicated to gaining women's rights.
5. Mitchell's Comet was discovered in 1847, which was named for Maria Mitchell.

Place limiting modifiers carefully.

Limiting modifiers include *almost, even, exactly, hardly, just, merely, nearly, only, scarcely,* and *simply*. In speech these modifiers often occur before the verb, regardless of the words they are intended to modify. In writing, however, these modifiers should fall immediately before the word or word group they modify to avoid any ambiguity:

Unclear She only found that fossil on her last dig.

Revised She found only that fossil on her last dig.

Revised She found that fossil only on her last dig.

EXERCISE 21.2 Using limiting modifiers

Use each of the following limiting modifiers in two versions of the same sentence. (You can do this exercise online at ablongman.com/littlebrown.)

Example:

only

He is the only one I like. He is the one only I like.

- | | | |
|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| 1. almost | 3. hardly | 5. nearly |
| 2. even | 4. simply | |

Make each modifier refer to only one grammatical element.

A modifier can modify only *one* element in a sentence—the subject, the verb, or some other element. A **squinting modifier** seems confusingly to refer to either of two words:

Squinting Snipers who fired on the soldiers often escaped capture.

Clear Snipers who often fired on the soldiers escaped capture.

Clear Snipers who fired on the soldiers escaped capture often.

When an adverb modifies an entire main clause, as in the last example, it can usually be moved to the beginning of the sentence: *Often, snipers who fired on the soldiers escaped capture.*

EXERCISE 21.3 Revising: Squinting modifiers

Revise each sentence twice so that the squinting modifier applies clearly first to one element and then to the other. (You can do this exercise online at ablongman.com/littlebrown.)

Example:

The work that he hoped would satisfy him completely frustrated him.

The work that he hoped would completely satisfy him frustrated him.

The work that he hoped would satisfy him frustrated him completely.

1. People who sunbathe often can damage their skin.
2. Sunbathers who apply a sunscreen frequently block some of the sun's harmful ultraviolet rays.
3. Men and women who lie out in the sun often have leathery, dry skin.
4. Doctors tell sunbathers when they are older they risk skin cancer.
5. People who stay out of the sun usually will have better skin and fewer chances of skin cancer.

1. Myra Bradwell founded in 1868 the *Chicago Legal News*.
2. Bradwell was later denied, although she had qualified, admission to the Illinois Bar Association.
3. In an attempt to finally gain admission to the bar, she carried the case to the Supreme Court, but the justices decided against her.
4. Bradwell was determined that no other woman would, if she were qualified, be denied entrance to a profession.
5. The Illinois legislature finally passed, in response to Bradwell's persuasion, a bill ensuring that no one on the basis of gender would be restricted from a profession.

Position adverbs with care.

A few adverbs are subject to conventions that can trouble non-native speakers of English.

v Adverbs of frequency

Adverbs of frequency include *always*, *never*, *often*, *rarely*, *seldom*, *sometimes*, and *usually*. They appear at the beginning of a sentence, before a one-word verb, or after the helping verb in a verb phrase:

	verb phrase adverb
Awkward	Robots have put sometimes humans out of work.
	helping verb main
Revised	Robots have sometimes put humans out of work.
	adverb verb phrase
Revised	Sometimes robots have put humans out of work.

Adverbs of frequency always follow the verb *be*:

	adverb verb
Awkward	Robots often are helpful to workers.
	verb adverb
Revised	Robots are often helpful to workers.

v Adverbs of degree

Adverbs of degree include *absolutely*, *almost*, *certainly*, *completely*, *especially*, *extremely*, *hardly*, and *only*. They fall just before the word modified (an adjective, another adverb, sometimes a verb).

	adjective adverb
Awkward	Robots have been useful especially in making cars.
	adverb adjective
Revised	Robots have been especially useful in making cars.

v Adverbs of manner

Adverbs of manner include *badly*, *beautifully*, *openly*, *sweetly*, *tightly*, *well*, and others that describe how something is done. They usually fall after the verb:

	adverb verb
Awkward	Robots smoothly work on assembly lines.
	verb adverb
Revised	Robots work smoothly on assembly lines.

v The adverb *not*

When the adverb *not* modifies a verb, place it after the helping verb (or the first helping verb if more than one):

	helping verb verb main
Awkward	Robots do think not.
	helping verb main verb
Revised	Robots do not think.

Place *not* after a form of *be*: *Robots are not thinkers*.

When *not* modifies another adverb or an adjective, place it before the other modifier: *Robots are not sleek machines.*

Arrange adjectives appropriately.

English follows distinctive rules for arranging two or three adjectives before a noun. (A string of more than three adjectives before a noun is rare.) The order depends on the meaning of the adjectives, as indicated in the following table:

many			state	laws
	striking	green	Thai	birds
a	fine	German		camera
this	square		wooden	table
all			business	reports
the	blue	litmus		paper

See page 442 for guidelines on punctuating two or more adjectives before a noun.

EXERCISE 21.5 Revising: Placement of adverbs and adjectives

Revise the sentences below to correct the positions of adverbs or adjectives. If a sentence is already correct as given, circle the number preceding it. (You can do this exercise online at ablongman.com/littlebrown.)

Example:

Gasoline high prices affect usually car sales.
High gasoline prices usually affect car sales.

1. Some years ago Detroit cars often were praised.
2. Luxury large cars especially were prized.
3. Then a serious oil shortage led drivers to value small foreign cars that got good mileage.
4. When gasoline ample supplies returned, consumers bought again American large cars.
5. However, the large cars not were luxury sedans but vans and sport-utility vehicles.

Dangling Modifiers

Relate dangling modifiers to their sentences.

A **dangling modifier** does not sensibly modify anything in its sentence:

Dangling Passing the building, the vandalism became visible.

Dangling modifiers usually introduce sentences, contain a verb form, and imply but do not name a subject: in the preceding example, the implied subject is the someone or something passing the building. Readers assume that this implied subject is the same as the subject of the sentence (*vandalism* in the example). When it is not, the modifier “dangles” unconnected to the rest of the sentence.

Certain modifiers are the most likely to dangle:

v **Participial phrases:**

Dangling Passing the building, the vandalism became visible.
Revised As we passed the building, the vandalism became visible.

v **Infinitive phrases:**

Dangling To understand the causes, vandalism has been extensively investigated.
Revised To understand the causes, researchers have extensively investigated vandalism.

v **Prepositional phrases in which the object of the preposition is a gerund:**

- Dangling After studying the problem, vandals are now thought to share certain characteristics.
 Revised After studying the problem, researchers think that vandals share certain characteristics.

v **Elliptical clauses in which the subject and perhaps the verb are omitted:**

- Dangling When destructive, researchers have learned that vandals are more likely to be in groups.
 Revised When vandals are destructive, researchers have learned, they are more likely to be in groups.

Dangling modifiers are especially likely when the verb in the main clause is in the **passive voice** instead of the **active voice**, as in *vandalism has been investigated* and *vandals are thought*. (See pp. 302–03 for more on the passive voice.)

Note A modifier may be dangling even when the sentence elsewhere contains a word the modifier might seem to describe, such as *vandals* below:

- Dangling When destructive, researchers have learned that vandals are more likely to be in groups.

In addition, a dangling modifier may fall at the end of a sentence:

- Dangling The vandalism was visible passing the building.

v **Revising dangling modifiers**

Revise most dangling modifiers in one of two ways, depending on what you want to emphasize in the sentence.

v **Change the subject of the main clause to a word the modifier properly describes:**

- Dangling To express themselves, graffiti decorate walls.
 Revised To express themselves, some youths decorate walls with graffiti.

v **Rewrite the dangling modifier as a complete clause with its own stated subject and verb:**

- Revised Because some youths need to express themselves, graffiti decorate walls.

EXERCISE 21.6 Revising: Dangling modifiers

Revise the following sentences to eliminate any dangling modifiers. Each item has more than one possible answer. (You can do this exercise online at ablongman.com/littlebrown.)

Example:

- Driving north, the vegetation became increasingly sparse.
 Driving north, we noticed that the vegetation became increasingly sparse.
 As we drove north, the vegetation became increasingly sparse.

1. After accomplishing many deeds of valor, Andrew Jackson's fame led to his election to the presidency in 1828 and 1832.
2. By the age of fourteen, both of Jackson's parents had died.
3. To aid the American Revolution, service as a mounted courier was chosen by Jackson.
4. Though not well educated, a successful career as a lawyer and judge proved Jackson's ability.
5. Winning many military battles, the American public believed in Jackson's leadership.

EXERCISE 21.7 Sentence combining: Placing modifiers

Combine each pair of sentences below into a single sentence by rewriting one as a modifier. Make sure the modifier applies clearly to the appropriate word. You will have to add, delete, and rearrange words, and you may find that more than one answer is possible in each case. (You can do this exercise online at ablongman.com/littlebrown.)

Example:

- Bob demanded a hearing from the faculty. Bob wanted to appeal the decision.
 Wanting to appeal the decision, Bob demanded a hearing from the faculty.

1. Evening falls in the Central American rain forests. The tungara frogs begin their croaking chorus.
2. Male tungara frogs croak loudly at night. The "songs" they sing are designed to attract female frogs.
3. But predators also hear the croaking. They gather to feast on the frogs.

4. The predators are lured by their croaking dinners. The predators include bullfrogs, snakes, bats, and opossums.
5. The frogs hope to mate. Their nightly chorus can result in death instead.

EXERCISE 21.8 Revising: Misplaced and dangling modifiers

Revise the following paragraph to eliminate any misplaced or dangling modifiers. (You can do this exercise online at ablongman.com/littlebrown.)

Central American tungara frogs silence several nights a week their mating croaks. When not croaking, the chance that the frogs will be eaten by predators is reduced. The frogs seem to fully believe in “safety in numbers.” They more than likely will croak along with a large group rather than by themselves. By forgoing croaking on some nights, the frogs’ behavior prevents the species from “croaking.”

Note See page 381 for an exercise involving misplaced and dangling modifiers along with other sentence errors.
<http://www.ablongman.com/littlebrown>

Visit the companion Web site for more help and additional exercises on misplaced and dangling modifiers.

Noun used as

adjective

Determiner

Opinion

Size or

shape

Color

Origin

Material

Noun

Identifying and revising dangling modifiers

- v **Identify the modifier's subject.** If the modifier lacks a stated subject (as *when in diapers* does), identify what the modifier describes.
- v **Compare the subject of the modifier and the subject of the sentence.** Verify that what the modifier describes is in fact the subject of the main clause. If it is not, the modifier probably dangles.
- v **Revise as needed.** Either (*a*) recast the dangling modifier with a stated subject of its own, or (*b*) change the subject of the main clause to be what the modifier describes.

Dangling modifier subject
 When in diapers, my mother remarried.

Revision *a* When I was in diapers, my mother remarried.

Revision *b* When in diapers, I attended my mother's second wedding.