

Modifiers

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial covers modifiers—how they work and fit inside a sentence, and how to spot dangling and misplaced modifiers:

1. Modifiers in Sentences

A **modifier** is a part of a sentence that does just what its name indicates—it modifies or adjusts. Technically, a modifier is a word, phrase, or clause that provides more information about something in the sentence.

Modifiers do this by pairing up with another word or phrase and slightly shifting its meaning.

What is the main point of this sentence?

Excitedly hoisting her fishing rod, Susan headed out to the river.

That first phrase is the modifier; the information about Susan's behavior and emotions as she leaves is adding to your understanding of the sentence. You now know that she's not heading out to the river sadly or without her fishing gear. She's excited, and she's got her tackle ready.

That modifier alters what you know about Susan, and therefore, is located right next to her name. This is ideal, as **modifiers**—whether they be words, phrases, or clauses—should always be situated close to the part of the sentence that they're modifying.



TERM TO KNOW

Modifier

A word that provides more information about something in the sentence.

2. Common Modifier Errors

When you get your modifiers wrong, you can end up with either of the following errors:

- Misplaced modifiers
- Dangling modifiers

Both of these are errors that can inhibit your readers' ability to understand your sentences, so you need to fix them as soon as you see them. This is really what the editing process is for.

2a. Misplaced Modifiers

When you lose track of where your modifier is and what it's meant to be doing, then you have **amisplaced modifier**. This is a modifier that is separate from the thing it modifies in the sentence; it does not logically modify what it is supposed to.

Remember how a modifier should come as close as possible to the thing it's modifying? This is so you don't end up misplacing that modifier and confusing your readers about what it's supposed to be modifying.

Misplaced modifiers can create confusion about what they are meant to modify and why, or they can end up modifying the wrong thing altogether.

What is the modifier in the following sentence?

The coat that I tried on was too big in the store.

If you took out where the trying on happened (in the store), you'd still have a full sentence that makes sense. Thus, you know that "in the store" is a phrase that's meant to modify something.

But what is it meant to modify? If you think about the sentence literally, it sounds like the coat was too big when the speaker tried it on in the store, but maybe it wasn't too big outside of the store, or now it's not too big. That place and time-based modifier is misplaced, and therefore doesn't clearly do its job.

The coat that I tried on in the store was too big.

Now you know that the coat was too big everywhere, but the speaker tried it on in the store, and that's where he or she realized it was too big. Now that the modifier is stuck right onto the thing it's modifying, you can understand the entire meaning of this sentence.



First is a sentence, and below it is a modifier to go with it. See if you can decide where in the sentence that modifier should go.

*I'll serve coffee to my guests
in big red mugs*

If you put it in the position below, then what is it closest to?

I'll serve coffee to my guests in big red mugs.

The guests. Are the guests somehow inside what must be very big red mugs? That wouldn't make sense. Therefore, you should probably put the modifier next to the coffee, because the coffee is what's being modified, and that's what's going in the mugs:

I'll serve coffee in big red mugs to my guests.

Misplaced modifiers can really influence the meaning of a sentence because modifiers themselves are very powerful.

Take this sentence:

I sold my muffins

Think about how different the meaning is when you add the modifier “just” in two different spots:

*I **just** sold my muffins.*

*I sold **just** my muffins.*

The former implies that it was mere moments ago that the speaker sold the muffins; the latter implies that there may have been other things for sale, but the speaker sold only the muffins.

Be careful to think through your intended meaning, and place your modifiers carefully to avoid creating unintended implications.



TERM TO KNOW

Misplaced Modifier

A modifier that is separate from the thing it modifies in the sentence; it does not logically modify what it is supposed to modify.

2b. Dangling Modifiers

If you add a modifier to a sentence without actually letting it attach to its mate, then you have what is called a **dangling modifier**. This is a word or phrase that modifies something not clearly identified in the sentence.

Remember that modifiers are always paired with another part of the sentence, so if that modifier is all alone, it's just dangling there, unable to attach its meaning to anything else. This can have unintended consequences as readers search for a connection where there isn't one.

What's happening in this sentence?

***Thirsty**, the milk was gone in minutes.*

Somehow, you've ended up with sentient milk that's fleeing the kitchen in search of something to drink. That's not a clear sentence; that's science fiction.

“Thirsty” is the modifier; without that word, the sentence “The milk was gone in minutes” makes a lot of sense. “Thirsty” is meant to modify something in the sentence, but it's missing its pair, and is thus unintentionally modifying the milk itself.

You need, then, people to drink the milk or people to be thirsty.

***Thirsty**, the children drank up all the milk in minutes.*

Here you've added in children who are thirsty and are going to drink that milk. Notice that the end result of this sentence still tells your readers that the milk is gone. The children drank up all the milk; there's nothing left. Adding in the modifier's match changes the sentence, but it doesn't change the intended meaning.

Dangling modifiers create unclear, grammatically incorrect sentences, and they can cause a host of unintended meanings to spring up in the readers' minds. Thus, be careful to always give a modifier its match and avoid science fiction sentences.



TERM TO KNOW

Dangling Modifier

A word or phrase that modifies something not clearly identified in the sentence.



SUMMARY

In this tutorial, you learned that **in sentences, modifiers** are words, phrases, or clauses that provide more information about something in the sentence.

When you write, you should be careful about where you locate your modifiers in order to avoid **common modifier errors**. **Misplaced modifiers** are modifiers that are separate from the things they modify in a sentence, and **dangling modifiers** are modifiers that modify things not clearly identified in the sentence. Paying attention to these grammatical issues is essential to achieving clear, concise writing that your readers will understand.

Good luck!

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Martina Shabram.



TERMS TO KNOW

Dangling Modifier

A word or phrase that modifies something not clearly identified in the sentence.

Misplaced Modifier

A modifier that is separate from the thing it modifies in the sentence; it does not logically modify what it is supposed to modify.

Modifier

A word that provides more information about something in the sentence.