

Error 11

Dangling or Misplaced Modifiers

A **modifier** is a word or phrase that describes. Modifiers are adjectives, adverbs, or words or phrases that function as adjectives or adverbs. What a modifier describes in a sentence depends not only on what it says, but also where it is put.

Snapping violently, the tourists ran from the alligator.

Here *snapping violently* is a modifier. Because of its place in the sentence, however, it modifies *tourists* rather than *alligator*. Such a modifier is said to dangle.

Dangling Modifiers

A **dangling modifier** is a word or phrase at the beginning of a sentence that mistakenly modifies the word immediately following. When a modifier begins a sentence, *the word it modifies must come immediately after*. Otherwise, the modifier will be unconnected to the word the writer meant it to modify. In short, it will dangle. Here are some examples:

- Dangling:** Dipping below the horizon, I watched as the sun set.
Dangling: Confused and upset, the crowded store caused the little girl to lose her mother.
Dangling: Screeching, we looked for our binoculars as the owl flew by.

To correct these sentences, place the word being modified immediately after the modifier and rewrite as necessary.

- Correct:** Dipping below the horizon, the sun set as I watched.
Correct: Confused and upset, the little girl lost her mother in the crowded store.
Correct: Screeching, the owl flew away as we looked for our binoculars.

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Sometimes correcting a dangling modifier results in the passive voice. In this case, restructure the sentence completely. Here is an example:

- Dangling:** Hiding under a rock, I found a little lizard.
- Correct but passive voice:** Hiding under a rock, a little lizard was found by me.
- Correct and active voice:** I found a little lizard hiding under a rock.

PRACTICING 1

Rewrite these sentences to correct the dangling modifiers.

1. Fluttering wildly, I caught the butterfly in my net.
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2. Newly polished, the guests marveled at the gleaming silverware.
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3. Hurrying through the grocery store, my shopping bag seemed especially heavy.
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4. Old and broken, she left the couch behind when she moved.
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5. Drooping pitifully, I watered the plant.
-

6. Drenched from the recent rain, he still watered the lawn.
-

7. Weeping on stage, the audience was enthralled by the actor.

8. Pounded by waves and sinking at the stern, I watched the ship go down.

9. As an athlete, weight training is very important.

10. Wearing my new glasses, the stars in the sky looked beautiful.

Misplaced Modifiers

A modifier tends to modify the nearest noun. For example, notice how the meaning of the following sentence changes as we move the modifier **only**:

She went into the pool wearing
her only bikini.

(She owned only one
bikini. **Only** is modifying
bikini.)

She went into the pool wearing
only her bikini.

(She wore nothing but a
bikini. **Only** is modifying
wearing.)

A **misplaced modifier** is too far from the word it is meant to modify and, as a result, it doesn't convey the correct meaning or it gives the sentence an unintended, funny meaning. Here are some examples of misplaced modifiers with unintentional meanings:

Misplaced: The fisherman caught a bass with a chuckle.

Misplaced: I climbed a tree with new shoes on.

Misplaced: She bicycled to Burlington to visit her grandmother wearing a bike helmet.

Because of a misplaced modifier, we have a *bass with a chuckle*, a *tree with new shoes*, and *grandmother wearing a bike helmet*. A

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misplaced modifier is corrected by rewriting the sentence. You must reword the modifier or move it closer to the word it modifies. Here are possible corrections:

With a chuckle, the fisherman caught a bass.

With new shoes on, I climbed the tree.

Wearing a bike helmet, she bicycled to Burlington to visit her grandmother.

To avoid the confusion of misplaced modifiers, always place a modifier immediately in front of the word it is meant to modify. This is especially true of one-word modifiers such as *almost*, *even*, *hardly*, *nearly*, *only*, and *often*. Because these words limit what follows, it is important where they occur in a sentence. Remember the bikini example at the beginning of this section. Another example follows.

He just baked a cake.

(He did it a moment ago.)

He baked just a cake.

(He didn't bake bread.)

PRACTICING 2

First underline the misplaced modifier in each sentence below. Then rewrite the sentence so that the modifier is correctly placed.

Example: I put money in the bank with a smile.

With a smile, I put money in the bank.

1. Jonathan gave his dog a bone with a pat on the head.

2. At the ceremony, he retired with honors in his uniform.

3. The pool table seemed tilted to the customers.

4. We saw huge fir trees skiing down the slope on both sides.

5. Josephine barbecued ribs for 20 people on the grill.

6. The jogger ran past the dog wearing a funny hat.

7. Spaghetti is most delicious when it is eaten on a patio with meal balls.

8. She almost handed out candy to the trick-or-treaters for two hours.

9. We saw the ocean waves sitting on a deck.

10. The young lovers admired the moon going on a stroll.

Error No. 11 Review

Underline the dangling and misplaced modifiers in the following paragraph. Then rewrite the sentences correctly in the spaces below. You should find six errors.

My favorite place during the summer is the beach. Relaxing on the sand, the waves roll in peacefully. Seagulls look for crabs overhead. When I'm on the beach, my mind is full of nothing but relaxation and pleasant dreams playing in the sand. Buzzing noisily, I ignore the hordes of flies. Occasionally, I wade into the surf and enjoy watching the waves up close with my shoes on. Thinking neither of work nor school, the beach is pure pleasure. In fact, when I'm on the beach, I think of nothing at all, except how lovely it is to be there.

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Omitted Commas

Part I

Punctuation marks are the traffic signs of writing. They are the visible marks that tell the reader when to slow down, when to speed up, and when to stop. In spoken sentences punctuation is heard as pauses, upbeats, and downbeats.

The Comma (,)

You hear the comma as a half-pause. Sometimes the comma just makes listening or reading easier, but sometimes it is crucial to meaning. Here is an example.

Still water was important to many primitive tribes.
Still water was important to many primitive tribes.

The difference in the meanings of these two sentences depends on where the comma is placed. In the first sentence, still means "motionless" or "nevertheless." In the second sentence, still serves as an adjective describing water.

Commas with coordinating conjunctions

Place a comma in front of coordinating conjunctions (and, but, or, for, nor, so, yet) that link independent clauses (see Unit 2), a comma. He dated Mabel, but he did not fall in love with her. I am possessed with nerves, and my girl friend is too. He wrote me three letters, so I finally answered him.

Do not use a comma before and if it is not followed by an independent clause.

Correct: He read a magazine and watched TV.
Incorrect: He read a magazine, and watched TV.