

# RULES FOR FINDING AND FIXING MISPLACED AND DANGLING MODIFIERS

## Understand the problem.

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Think of *modifiers* as arrows and the words they describe as bull's-eyes. For clear, logical sentences, writers aim modifiers so that they strike as close to the intended targets as possible.

Sneering with superiority, Roland drank iced tea from a crystal glass that sparkled in the afternoon sun.

*Sneering with superiority*, a *participle phrase*, describes *Roland*, the *noun* right after it. *That sparkled in the afternoon sun*, a *relative clause*, describes *glass*, the noun in front.

## RECOGNIZING A MISPLACED MODIFIER

When a writer's aim is off and too much distance separates the modifier from its target, the result is a *misplaced modifier*.

*Sucking warm water from a rubber hose, envious looks* were shot Roland's way as the other picnickers quenched their own thirst.

*Sucking warm water from a rubber hose*, a participle phrase, should describe *picnickers*, but since that noun is so far away, the phrase seems to be modifying *envious looks*, which don't have mouths that can suck water!

## RECOGNIZING A DANGLING MODIFIER

If the sentence fails to include a target, the modifier is *dangling*.

*With a sigh of pleasure, consumption of cucumber sandwiches commenced.*

We assume that Roland is the one sighing with pleasure and eating cucumber sandwiches, but notice that he's not in the sentence, so we can't tell for sure!

## Know the solution.

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Misplaced and dangling modifiers make sentences awkward and inelegant. They keep sentences from expressing clear, straightforward ideas. When you discover a misplaced or dangling modifier in a sentence, you will need to rearrange and/or revise the sentence parts to untangle the idea the sentence wants to express.

### FIXING MISPLACED MODIFIERS

Rearranging sentence parts will often fix a misplaced modifier. Remember that most modifiers come as close to their targets as possible.

Here is the original error:

*Sucking warm water from a rubber hose, envious looks* were shot Roland's way as the other picnickers quenched their own thirst.

If we move things around, the modifier hits the right target:

*Sucking warm water from a rubber hose, the other picnickers* quenched their own thirst as they shot envious looks Roland's way.

Now we have picnickers drinking from the rubber hose, which is clear and logical!

### FIXING DANGLING MODIFIERS

To fix a dangling modifier, you will need to add a target to the sentence and then tweak the remaining words to make sense.

Here is the original error without a logical target:

*With a sigh of pleasure, consumption of cucumber sandwiches commenced.*

Notice that the addition of a target makes the sentence clear:

With a sigh of pleasure, ***Roland*** began to consume cucumber sandwiches.

After ***Roland*** sighed with pleasure, he began to consume cucumber sandwiches.

Now we know *who* got to eat that delicious snack!



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