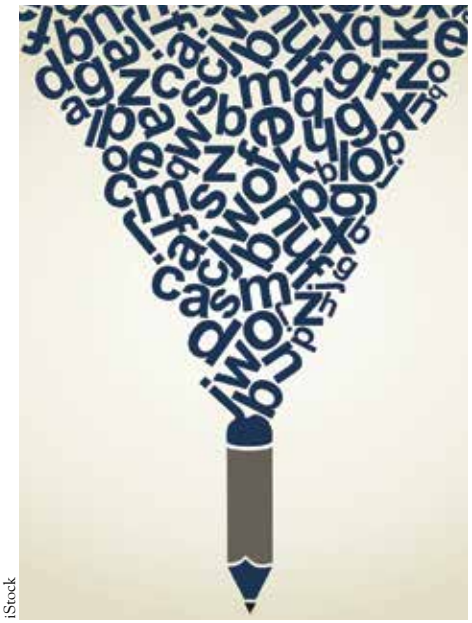
Finding and Fixing Misplaced, Squinting and Dangling Modifiers

Modifier Fighters

By Elizabeth Ruiz Frost



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Modifiers help make sentences clear, interesting and precise. But when they show up in the wrong part of a sentence, they can make the sentence confusing or can change the meaning altogether.

Before getting into the ways that good modifiers go bad, let's start with the basics. What is a modifier? A modifier is a word or phrase that describes another word or phrase in the sentence. In the very simple phrase "the blue car," the modifier is the adjective *blue*, which modifies the noun *car*.

Modifiers aren't always simple adjectives. In the sentence, "She talked for hours about the concert, which was the best she'd ever seen," there are two modifier phrases. The phrase "for hours" modifies how long she talked, and the phrase "which was the best she'd ever seen" modifies the concert.

For clarity, the modifier should be adjacent to the thing it modifies in the sentence, or at least as close to it as possible. When the modifier gets too far away or when the modified word or phrase is omitted, the reader will get confused.

Misplaced modifiers are one of my favorite grammatical problems because they can yield some unintentionally funny sentences, like, "Bucking and whinnying wildly, Pat tried to soothe his distressed horse." However, misplaced modifiers sometimes cause confusion, which isn't so funny.

Misplaced Modifiers

In a misplaced modifier, the modifier is stranded, placed too far from the word or phrase it describes. Thus, the modifier inadvertently ends up describing the wrong thing.

One might never misplace the modifier in a phrase as simple as "blue car," where there is a simple adjective and noun. But modifiers do get misplaced even in the simplest of sentences. For example:

Lawrence filled the silver dog's bowl.

Technically, the dog in that sentence is silver and we don't learn the color of the bowl. That was the not the writer's intent. Move the modifying adjective so that it's next to the bowl, and there will be no confusion:

Lawrence filled the dog's silver bowl.

Usually, a sentence's construction is more complicated than adjective + noun. For example, in the next sentence, the modifier is a phrase rather than a single word. Sometimes knowing where to stick an entire modifying phrase can be trickier than placing an adjective with a noun, and that's where most problems tend to arise. The modifier is misplaced in the following sentence:

He made a birthday cake for the woman that was rich and delicious.

The modifier in this sentence is "rich and delicious." Because it's adjacent to *woman* instead of *cake*, the writer has described the woman as rich and delicious. Could be, but the writer probably meant to say the cake was rich and delicious. Moving the modifier so that it's adjacent to the cake improves the sentence. Two possible revisions are below:

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He made a rich and delicious birthday cake for the woman.

He made a birthday cake that was rich and delicious for the woman.

Here's another example:

Theresa smelled the oysters walking into the restaurant.

"Walking into the restaurant" is the modifier in this sentence. The modified word — *Theresa* — is right there in the sentence, but it's too remote from

the modifier. The misplaced modifier inadvertently modifies the closest noun, which is the oysters. The result is ridiculous, though kind of cute to picture. Fixing this one is easy. Again, here are two suggestions:

Walking into the restaurant, Theresa smelled the oysters.

Theresa smelled the oysters when she walked into the restaurant.

Only, *nearly*, *almost*, *just* and *sometimes* are commonly misplaced modifiers that cause confusion and change the meaning of sentences. Compare these two sentences containing the word *only*:

Mary only donated $100 to the Campaign for Equal Justice.

Mary donated only $100 to the Campaign for Equal Justice.

These two look an awful lot alike, but they mean different things. The first sentence says Mary donated nothing but money — no clothes, no fruit baskets, nothing else at all. It modifies the type of Mary's donation. The second sentence says Mary donated $100 and not a dollar more. *Only* modifies the amount this time. The location of *only* changes the meaning because it modifies the word it precedes. Therefore, to make sure a sentence says what you want it to say, place a modifier word like *only* directly before the word it modifies.

Here are a couple more examples where location matters with these commonly misplaced modifiers:

Steven nearly missed every obstacle during his driving test.

Steven missed nearly every obstacle during his driving test.

The first sentence means he didn't hit anything, but he came close every time. The second sentence means he did hit a couple obstacles but not all of them.

Monica almost plagiarized the entire paper.

Monica plagiarized almost the entire paper.

In the first sentence above, Monica came pretty close to plagiarizing, but didn't plagiarize anything. This sentence

evokes Monica's ethical battle where integrity won out. In the latter sentence, integrity lost, and Monica did plagiarize most of the words in her paper.

Misplaced modifiers also tend to result from poorly crafted introductory clauses. Writers use introductory clauses to add a description to a sentence, but sometimes the introduction doesn't work with the rest of the sentence. The results can be pretty funny. For example:

> *Freshly groomed, Lucas took his poodle out for a walk.*

Here, the modifier is "freshly groomed," and the writer intended for it to modify the poodle. The poodle is in the sentence, but again, it's too remote. Because *Lucas* is the noun closest to the modifier, the introduction inadvertently tells the reader that Lucas is freshly groomed. One could simply switch the order of the nouns to make the poodle the proximate noun, thereby resolving the modifier problem, but the sentence is pretty ugly:

> *Freshly groomed, the poodle was taken for a walk by Lucas.*

By revising the introductory clause instead, the sentence works better. The revision below gets rid of the passive voice, and the modifier is right next to Lucas:

> *After getting his poodle freshly groomed, Lucas took him for a walk.*

Squinting Modifiers

In each of the examples above with misplaced modifiers, the reader will be confused because she will attribute the modifier to the wrong word or phrase. The reader's understanding of the sentence will be incorrect. Another type of misplaced modifier — the squinting modifier — creates ambiguity instead.

A squinting modifier is a modifier that could reasonably modify more than one thing in the sentence. Typically, these modifiers are squeezed between two different ideas, and a reader could reasonably believe that the modifier pertains to either one. Squinting modifiers are a subcategory of misplaced modifiers because the problem is their location. For example, the location of the adverb *quickly* in the following sentence creates ambiguity:

> *Running quickly tires Sarah.*

Here, *quickly* could reasonably modify the idea to its left and to its right. That would give the sentence two possible meanings. Does running at a fast pace make her tired? Or does running make her tired right away? Sometimes moving a word or two around will clarify the meaning, but sometimes rephrasing is in order:

Running makes Sarah tired quickly.

Running at a fast pace tires Sarah.

Below are a few more examples of squinting modifiers where the meaning of the sentence is ambiguous. The modifiers are indicated in bold text. Note that squinting modifiers are often but not always adverbs. Think about how you would revise these sentences to improve their clarity:

*Scott told Theresa **when the rally was over** they would get lunch.*

*Lawyers who file past the deadline **rarely** are reprimanded.*

*She promised **after the war** she'd marry her.*

*We agreed **at our first meeting** to vote in new officers.*

*Traveling **often** made her feel worldly.*

Writers can have a tough time catching squinting modifiers because one's own ambiguous writing isn't always so obvious. A writer typically knows just what he meant when he was writing, and that's what he sees on the page. Like a person looking at one of those Magic Eye posters that used to be in shopping malls, the writer might not immediately see the other possible meaning. To get the perspective necessary to catch squinting modifiers, a writer usually benefits from taking time away from the project between writing and editing. That bit of time can help a reader notice ambiguities and ask important questions of herself like, "does this really say what I meant to say?"

Dangling Modifiers

The next type of misused modifier is the dangling modifier. A modifier is dangling if the thing it modifies isn't clearly stated in the sentence. As a result, the reader can't correctly determine what the writer intended to modify or has to

make an inference from the surrounding context. Dangling modifiers are not a subcategory of misplaced modifiers because the problem isn't the location of the modifier, necessarily. The problem is the absence of the modified idea. Writers tend to use dangling modifiers when they write introductory clauses, like in the following sentence:

Exhausted from a lengthy trial, a vacation was in order.

The modifying phrase here is "exhausted from a lengthy trial." The problem in this sentence is that the exhausted person — the thing being modified by the introductory clause — isn't stated anywhere in the sentence. It's implied, and perhaps the surrounding sentences would have provided enough context for a reader to make sense of it. But the sentence is still grammatically incorrect.

This sentence would be clearer if the modifier and the modified word were stated together. The following two revisions improve it by putting the modified word into the sentence:

Exhausted from a lengthy trial, the lawyer needed a vacation.

The lawyer, who was exhausted from a lengthy trial, needed a vacation.

A quick note about these revisions: The second revision starts with a concrete subject — the lawyer — which can make a sentence a bit easier to follow. Readers can more easily process sentences that are constructed as noun + subject + object. But the subject and the verb (*lawyer* and *needed*) are remote from each other here, interrupted by the modifying phrase. When these interrupting phrases get long, and we've all seen plenty of that in legal writing, the point of the sentence gets buried.

Here's another example of where the thing that's modified is missing:

Without having proven a motive, the jury probably won't convict.

As in the last example, the modified word or words are missing. Who didn't prove it? The writer doesn't tell the reader. And here, the dangling modifier creates a second problem. The reader could incorrectly but reasonably surmise that the jury was supposed to have proven a motive. The reader would reasonably come to that conclusion because she will assign the modifier to the noun in the sentence. This problem is fixed by putting the modified word back into the sentence.

Because the prosecution didn't prove a motive, the jury probably won't convict.

The fix is simple once the writer identifies the problem. And fortunately, these dangling modifiers are relatively easy to find because one can limit the hunt primarily to introductory phrases.

Conclusion

Modifiers are a crucial part of conveying substance in sentences. Try omitting the modifiers from the examples above and you end up with a whole lot of nonsense. But crucial substance can all go wrong so quickly if modifiers are inadvertently paired with the wrong words and phrases. The key editing questions one should ask to find and fix modifier problems are:

- What am I describing in this sentence?
- Where, in relation to the modifier, is that modified word or phrase located?
- Could a reader reasonably think this sentence means something other than what I intended?

Recognizing ambiguity in our own writing can be difficult. A reader can best analyze the questions above by thinking about the meaning of each sentence after taking a break between writing and editing. Then, with the proper perspective, and by considering each sentence carefully, the modifier problems can be discovered and fixed. (I hope you noticed the dangling modifier in that sentence.)

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