

Rutgers Learning Centers

At Camden Campus

Misplaced and Dangling Modifiers

A modifier is a word or group of words that describes another word and makes its meaning more specific. Often, modifying phrases add information about where, when or how something is done. A modifier works best when it is right next to the word it modifies. For example, consider the modifiers in the following sentence (they are underlined for you): “The awesome dude rode a wave breaking on the shore.”

The word “awesome” is an adjective (a one-word modifier) that sits right next to the word “dude” it modifies. This minimizes confusion — we wouldn’t want to put “awesome” next to “rode,” because it might suggest an “awesome rode” rather than “dude.” Also, the phrase “breaking on the shore” tells us where he rode the wave; thus, “breaking on the shore” is a modifying phrase that must be placed next to the word “wave” it modifies.

Below are some examples of poorly placed modifiers. See if you can identify the problems:

1. Roger looked at twenty-five sofas shopping on Saturday.

The writer probably meant that Roger saw twenty-five sofas while *he* (not the twenty-five sofas) was shopping on Saturday. Because *Shopping on Saturday* is meant to modify *Roger*, it should be right next to *Roger*, as follows: *Shopping on Saturday, Roger looked at twenty-five sofas.*

2. The woman tore open the package she had just received with her fingernails.

Had the woman really *received* the package with her fingernails? The writer must have meant that she tore open the package with her fingernails. The sentence should be rewritten like this: *With her fingernails, the woman tore open the package she had just received.* *With her fingernails* modifies *tore open the package*, so the two phrases should be next to each other.

3. Drenched in blueberry syrup, the waiter brought the pancakes to the table.

The sentence seems to say that the *waiter* was drenched in blueberry syrup. Actually, the pancakes were drenched. To make the intended meaning clear, rewrite the sentence: *The waiter brought the pancakes, drenched in blueberry syrup, to the table.* Because *drenched in blueberry syrup* is meant to modify *pancakes*, it should be right next to *pancakes*.

4. Lying in a heap on the closet floor, Jean found her son’s dirty laundry.

It sounds as if *Jean* were lying on the closet floor when she found her son’s laundry, but really *lying in a heap on the closet floor* modifies *her son’s dirty laundry*. Therefore, the two phrases should be right next to each other: *Jean found her son’s dirty laundry lying in a heap on the closet floor.*

See other side for more >>>

For more information, visit or call your nearest Rutgers Learning Center, or visit our website:<http://rlc.rutgers.edu>

Camden
Armitage 231
856/225-6442

College Ave
Kreeger LRC
732/932-1443

Cook/Douglass
Loree 124
732/932-1660

Livingston
Tillett 111
732/445-0986

Newark
Conklin 126
973/353-5608

MORE MISPLACED MODIFIERS:

5. I saw sharks scuba-diving.

Who was scuba-diving? The sharks or a person? At present, the sharks are! The writer placed the modifier too close to another noun, "sharks." Better to place the modifier closer to the noun "I" and get the intended results: *Scuba-diving, I saw sharks.*

6. When seven years old, Jeff's father taught him to play ball.

It sounds as if Jeff's father is only seven years old. The word "Jeff's" in this sentence acts as a descriptive adjective modifying a noun; it is not a noun in itself. Try: *When Jeff was seven years old, his father taught him to play ball.*

7. Turning on the ignition, the car backfired.

Always be careful using present participles (verb stem + ing) at the beginning of the sentence. The noun that follows the participial phrase must relate to the phrase. Try: *As I turned on the ignition, the car backfired.*

8. Looking at my watch, a taxi nearly ran me over.

Taxis are incapable of looking at watches (see preceding example); therefore, we need to say who is looking at the watch. *While I was looking at my watch, a taxi nearly ran me over.*

9. When my husband and I were in St. Martin, we stopped every morning for baguettes. The aroma filled our car, which was delicious.

The writer was too wordy, and used a dangling phrase where a single, well-placed adjective might have done as well. Consider: *The delicious aroma filled our car.* Or: *The aroma, which was delicious, filled our car.*

10. Though huge, with green scales and great fangs, I wasn't intimidated by the monster.

Clearly, there are no people with green scales and great fangs, so the writer must have meant that those qualities describe the monster. We frequently run into this type of error when we use a passively constructed verb tense (verb to be + past participle 'ed'). A better way to convey the sense is: *Though huge, with green scales and great fangs, the monster didn't intimidate me.*