

Dangling and Misplaced Modifiers

DANGLING MODIFIERS

A dangling modifier is a phrase or clause that does not logically modify any word in the sentence in which it appears. Although most commonly found at the beginning of the sentence, the dangling modifier may be located at the end of the sentence, too.

Example: Swimming out into the lake, the water grew cold.

(The only noun in the main clause is "water. The water was not swimming.)

Correct a dangling modifier in one of two ways:

1. Supply the noun or pronoun that it should modify and place the modifier next to the word.

Example: Swimming out into the lake, I felt the water grow cold.

2. Change the dangling construction into a complete clause.

Example: As I swam into the lake, the water felt cold.

Dangling modifiers usually take one of four forms:

I. Dangling Participial Phrase (An "-ing" verb form)

Example: Stepping into the boat, my camera dropped into the water.

Revision: Stepping into the boat, I dropped my camera into the water.

While I was stepping into the boat, my camera dropped into the water.

Example: The mountains were snow-covered and cloudless, flying over the Rockies.

Revision: When I flew over the Rockies, the mountains were snow covered and cloudless.

Flying over the Rockies, I saw that the mountains were snow covered and cloudless.

Example: Driving through the mountains, many bears were seen.

Revision:

2. Dangling Gerunds (An "-ing" verb form used as a noun)

Example: After driving all day, the motel was a welcome sight.

Revision: After driving all day, we welcomed the sight of the motel.

After we had driven all day, the motel was a welcome sight.

Example: Before exploring the desert, our water supply was replenished.

Revision:

3. Dangling Infinitives ("To" plus a root verb)

Example: To write effectively, practice is necessary.

Revision: To write effectively, one must practice.

If one wishes to write effectively, practice is necessary. (or. ..one must practice.)

Example: To examine the brakes, the wheel must be removed.

Revision:

4. Dangling Elliptical Clauses (A clause in which the subject or verb is understood)

Example: While combing my hair this morning, a man's face appeared at the window.

Revision: While combing my hair this morning, I saw a man's face appear at the window.

While I was combing my hair this morning, a man's face appeared at the window.

Example: When a baby, my grandfather gave me a silver cup.

Revision:

Many phrases are well established introductory expressions and are permissible in formal writing.

Examples: Judging from past experience. .. In the first place. .. Considering the situation. .. Granted the results. .. To sum up. ..

MISPLACED MODIFIERS

Because word order is often important to the meaning of a sentence, a modifier, be it a phrase or a word, should be placed as close as possible to the word it modifies. Many modifiers can be moved to various positions in the sentence, but if ambiguity results, the word order must be corrected.

Misplaced modifiers generally take one of four forms:

1. Misplaced Adverbs

Example: This will only take five minutes.

I nearly earned a hundred dollars.

Revision: This will take only five minutes.

I earned nearly a hundred dollars.

Example: I have followed the advice faithfully given by the manual.

Revision:

2. Misplaced Phrases and Clauses

Example: He lost the chance to make large profits through the work of imitators.

Revision: Through the work of imitators, he lost the chance to make large profits.

Example: He searched around and found an old bus schedule in the drawer that was out of date.

Revision: He searched around and found in a drawer an old bus schedule that was out of date.

Example: I heard that Senator Jones had been shot on the morning broadcast.

Revision:

3. Squinting Modifiers (A word or phrase placed in a position so that it modifies either a preceding word or the word after it)

Example: Reading a book frequently will change the whole course of a man's life.

Revision: Reading a book will frequently change the whole course of a man's life.

Example: The child who lies in nine cases out of ten is frightened.

Revision:

4. Split Infinitives (A modifier of one or more words placed between the "to" and the root verb)

Example: It was my custom to at least once a month visit my grandmother.

Revision: It was my custom to visit my grandmother at least once a month. Example: She tried to carefully handle the kitten.

Revision:

PRACTICE A

Using the following phrases and elliptical clauses as introductory modifiers, write complete sentences.

Example: Having weeded the garden, my father sat down to admire his handiwork.

1. When putting the microfilm on the reader,
2. Skiing behind the boat,
3. To be on time for my first class,
4. Before placing the overseas call,
5. Having lined up by the fountain,
6. Frequently interrupted by others living in the dormitory,
7. Not wishing to disturb the student working in the reference room,
8. While exploring the attic,
9. To make good coffee,
10. Thinking realistically about the future,

PRACTICE EXERCISE B

Revise the following sentences to correct any dangling or misplaced modifiers.

Write the correction in the spaces above the sentences, using arrows if necessary to show the correct position of the modifier. Write "C" if the sentence is correct.

Example: He sent us the full story of his rescue from the Ozarks.

1. Burned to a cinder, I could not eat the toast.
2. Do not apply the paint until thoroughly stirred.
3. While sleeping, the covers were kicked off the bed.
4. After barking at the moon past midnight, the Nortons decided to complain to the dog's owners.
5. To appreciate D. W. Griffith's films, the period in which they were produced must be understood.
6. At the end of the period we were told to promptly hand in our bluebooks.

7. Concerned by the international news, Washington was the best place for the President.
8. She wore a ribbon in her hair which was a light pink.
9. The film about the life of the sea otter which I saw downtown was very interesting.
10. He wrote his book on gambling in Iowa.
11. When trying to make the hook shot, the floor proved to be too slippery for Clarence.
12. The rain began to fall immediately after planting the grass.
13. While examining the sapphire, the experienced jeweler detected the scratch.
14. To become thoroughly familiar with the resources of a large library, years of experience are required.
15. Never having been to Hong Kong, it was foolish for her to choose it as the setting of her short story.
16. While lecturing on his favorite subject for the third day, students napped or wrote letters.
17. The term reactionary can be applied to political, social, or economic (or a combination of the three) beliefs.
18. After nicking a submerged rock, the canoe began to slowly but steadily leak and to gradually settle deeper in the water.
19. She told him to for Heaven's sake shut up.
20. Having come across the work of both Henry James and Samuel Clemens in the old magazines, a fascinating pastime was exploring other issues.
21. When waiting for the dentist, every sound from the office is nerve-wracking.
22. After correcting my original calculations, the problem was finally solved.
23. Having seen Beckett's Waiting for Godot, my attitude toward modern drama has changed completely.
24. The directions were clear, and my trouble could have been prevented, if followed correctly.
25. To write a successful research paper, one should follow certain prescribed steps.