

Free Modifiers

--from *Process and Procedure* by Harold Harp and Walt Klarner

When revising, the writer adds detail in free modifiers. When editing, the writer expresses detail in free modifiers. Free modifiers are added to a base sentence and set off with commas. They may be added to the beginning of a sentence (initial modifier), within the sentence (medial modifier), or at the end (final modifier). Examine the following examples of each type:

initial modifier	<u>Tossing her books on the table</u> , she ran into the kitchen.
medial modifier	The test, <u>a comprehensive history final</u> , lasted a full two hours.
final modifier	She looked around the room, <u>her eyes reflecting her confidence</u> .

Notice that the first example could also have been written as a final modifier: She ran into the kitchen, tossing her books on the table. But notice that it changes the meaning. In the first version, she tossed her books on a table and then ran into the kitchen. In the second version, she ran into the kitchen and tossed her books on a table in the kitchen.

In contrast, the second example could be written as either an initial or final modifier without changing the meaning:

A comprehensive history final, the test lasted a full two hours.

OR

The test lasted a full two hours, a comprehensive history final.

You might change the location of a free modifier for sentence variety or smoother reading, but make sure you do not change a meaning you do not wish to change. Also, realize that sentences may have more than one free modifier.

A free modifier can be written in any of the following forms:

TYPE	EXAMPLE
prepositional phrase	with ash-blonde hair
noun phrase	an ash blonde
verb phrase	running to meet his wife to do his best finished with her work
adjective phrase	nervous at the thought
adjective series	ready and confident
adverb phrase	quickly as possible
adverb series	carefully and thoroughly
absolute phrase	her eyes focusing on him his thoughts on his test
subordinate clause	after she left home because he prepared

Look carefully at each type and notice the difference or variety in the structures. Try to use this variety in your writing. When editing for style, look at the details you have added during the revision process. Do you use a variety of structures to express them? Notice how the following sentence can be written at least three different ways to achieve variety.

He focused his eyes on the test and began to work.

Focusing his eyes on the test, he began to work.

His eyes focused on the test, he began to work.

Look at the sentences in your writing and add variety by choosing a variety of structures.
