

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-blond hair |
| noun phrase | an ash blond |
| 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.

THE BASE CLAUSE AND THE MEDIAL MODIFIER

The base clause is relatively easy to locate when a sentence has only initial and/or final free modifiers. Finding the base clause is more difficult when a medial modifier is present. Remember, a medial modifier is a punctuated word or group of words that splits up or interrupts the base clause.

The soldier, a Vietnam veteran, applied for the job.

The above sentence contains a medial modifier. However, our first step is to locate the base clause. We look for the subject (noun or pronoun) and the predicate (verb(s) and objects).

Usually, the pattern will appear as follows: (Subject) (Predicate)

The subject names the person, place or thing that the writer is discussing or describing. The predicate describes the action or condition of the subject.

(Subject) (Predicate) (Subject) (Predicate)

The child asked for a glass of water. He was very upset.

Notice that the subject is either a noun or pronoun. The predicate contains one or more verbs.

The typical pattern for a sentence with a medial modifier is as follows:

(Subject) (Medial Modifier) (Predicate)

As you can see, the subject is separated from the predicate by the medial modifier. Also note how punctuation sets off the medial modifier. If a comma (or a dash) immediately follows the subject, suspect a medial modifier. Then look for a second comma (or dash) just before the verb of the predicate.

Now, let's look at that sentence again, with the subject and predicate of the base clause bold.

(Subject) (Predicate)

The soldier, a Vietnamese veteran, **applied for the job**.

The comma after *soldier* signals a free modifier. Now we must find the second comma and also see if there is a verb following it. All the material in the middle (between the commas) is a medial modifier.

Practice Exercise A

Underline the base clause in the following sentences. Look for the commas.

1. The College Commons, the large building to the left of the parking lot, is the center of student social life.
2. Jake, an old man, just stood there.
3. The disco, a renovated warehouse, was filled with people and music.

If there is a comma immediately following the subject (noun) of the sentence, assume that you are dealing with a medial modifier. Look for a second comma later in the sentence. The rest of the base clause probably follows that comma.

Practice Exercise B

Underline the base clause in each of the following sentences. Circle the commas setting off the medial modifier.

1. Peter Ivanovich, like everyone else on such occasions, entered feeling uncertain what he would have to do.
--Leo Tolstoy
2. The quartermaster, purple in the face, left us without looking back.
--Isaac Babel
3. Mr. Greenleaf, looking into the distance over the near pasture, removed a package of cigarets from his shirt pocket and let one fall into his hand.
--Flannery O' Connor
4. He was going to Eton, his father's school, in the following autumn.
--D. H. Lawrence
5. The drummer saw that the barkeeper, without a sound, had taken a Winchester from beneath the bar.
--Stephen Crane
6. The car, tipped toward the edge, rolled a little.
--Eudora Welty

In the following sentence we have a medial free modifier:

The realms of day and night, two different worlds coming from two different poles, mingled during this time.

--Hermann Hesse

The notation:

- 1) The realms of day and night, /, mingled during this time.
- 2) / two different worlds coming from two different poles /

The notation of this sentence indicates that the base clause has been interrupted by material represented by the slash (/). Because only material of the first level of generality can be included in the #1 line, the second level free modifier must be omitted. Yet, the interruption must be correctly notated--hence the slash surrounded by the punctuation that set it off. The **2 /** indicates that the second level modifier is a medial and read in place of the slash on line #1. No comma is present after the word "poles" because it has already been indicated after the slash.

Another Explanation:

After you have located the base clause of a sentence, you are ready to notate the levels of generality. In the previous exercises you had underlined the base clause and circled the significant commas setting off the medial modifier. The base clause with the commas is positioned on line #1 (first level of generality). The medial modifier is replaced by a slash (/). All that remains is to write the missing material (medial modifier) on the next line. This medial modifier is assigned #2 because it explains or describes the base clause. Placing a slash (/) after the #2 tells us that the words on line #2 belong where the slash appears between the commas on line #1.

Practice Exercise C

Notate the levels of generality of the following sentences.

1. John, a college freshman, went to Boston for the summer.
2. The car, an old Ford, was shaking apart.
3. Warren, a Vonnegut fan, asked an absurd question.
4. The students, discussing the movie *Future Shock*, didn't notice that the hour was over.

Base Clause and Initial/Final Modifiers

A sentence can be short--

Jesus wept.

Or it can be long--

It is not of the games children play in the evening that I want to speak now, it is of a contemporaneous atmosphere that has little to do with them: that of the fathers of families, each in his space of lawn, his shirt fishlike pale in the unnatural light and his face nearly anonymous, hosing their lawns.

--James Agee

Neither will be held up as a model for you to mimic. You are capable of the first example, and the second, while holding true to the principles contained in this unit, represents some further ground which you may reach long after you have completed this course of instruction. Instead, let us look at this sentence:

World War I began like a summer festival--all billowing skirts and golden epaulets.

--Dalton Trumbo

In addition to the base clause, the sentence contains a final modifier:

1) Base (B): World War I began like a summer festival--

2) Final Modifier (FM): all billowing skirts and golden epaulets.

The base clause contains the most general information in the sentence. The final modifier follows the natural word order and modifies a group of words in the base clause--specifically "summer festival." You should notice the treatment of the punctuation, the dash remaining with the base clause and the period indicated at the end of the second level final free modifier. Please note that the second level final free modifier cannot be a base clause because it cannot stand alone as a simple sentence.

In the following sentence we have both an initial free modifier and a final free modifier:

Sensing a possible rival, I watched him warily, wondering who he was.

--Ralph Ellison

2) Initial Modifier (IM): Sensing a possible rival,

1) B: I watched him warily,

2) FM: wondering who he was.

Both initial and final free modifiers modify the base clause. Each line ends with the punctuation which sets it off, and the word order follows as the sentence is written. Notice the procedure of indenting the levels with the base clause positioned on the extreme left. **If any change in the above notation is allowed, the sentence will read incorrectly.**

Because you build the notation around the base clause, locate the base clause first. Even though the answers required in exercises, quizzes and even tests are notations, you should underline the base clause first. Then you can more clearly see the free modifiers.

Practice Exercises

Underline the base clause in each of the following sentences and notate the levels of generality (1=base clause; 2=initial/final modifiers).

1. An hour later, looking out of the window, I saw Grossbart headed across the field.

--Philip Roth

2. They toiled up the ill-lit narrow staircase, the teacher trailing them.

--Bernard Malamud

3. After he had entered the room, there was a crash as if he had kicked something out of his way.

--Flannery O'Connor

4. He looked completely round the room, as if in meditation, his eyes roving in their distance.

5. Taking up a strategic position, the man howled a challenge.

--Stephen Crane

6. He (the hawk) could sail for hours, searching the blanched grasses below him with his telescopic eye, gaining height against the wind, descending in mile-long gently declining swoops when he curved and rode back, never beating a wing.

--Walter Van Tilburg Clark