Modifiers give more information/description to nouns and verbs. Modifiers occur in adjective and adverb forms. In general adjectives usually modify nouns; adverbs usually modify verbs.* Modifiers can be single words or phrases. To establish understanding for the reader, it is important that modifiers refer clearly to the words they modify. The following rules will help avoid modifier mistakes commonly made by writers.

**Rule 1:** Place modifiers as close to the modified word as possible.

*Examples:* The county *almost spent* $5 million on road work. (unclear)

- The modified word here is *spent*, making it sound like the county possibly did not spend $5 million on road work.

The county spent *almost $5 million* on road work. (clear)

- The modified words here are *$5 million*, changing the meaning to describe how much was spent on road work.

The fugitive was described as a five-foot tall *man* with a moustache *weighing 130 pounds*. (unclear)

- The fugitive weighs 130 pounds, not his moustache.

The fugitive was described as a five-foot tall *man weighing 130 pounds* with a moustache. (clear)

**Rule 2:** Move awkwardly placed modifiers, especially modifying phrases. When modifying nouns, usually the modifier is placed before the noun it modifies.

*Examples:* Daniel, *after taking vacation*, had trouble adjusting to regular life as a student. (awkward)

- The first sentence is not incorrect; it is simply awkward because the modifying phrase separates the modified word, the subject *Daniel*, from its verb *had.*

After *taking vacation*, Daniel *had* trouble adjusting to regular life as a student. (clear)

*For further explanation of adjectives and adverbs, please see the JCCC Writing Center adjectives and adverbs handouts.*
**Rule 3:** For clear meaning, put limiting modifiers such as *almost, even, just, merely, nearly, not, only* in front of OR right after the words they modify. In academic writing, writers limit the use of these words.

*Examples:* Almost a handful of students attended the lecture.

• The words *a handful* are modified by *almost* giving an idea of about how many students attended the lecture.

A handful of students *almost attended* the lecture.

• The word *attended* is modified by *almost* giving the idea that the students did not go to the lecture, although they may have thought about it.

Five students *only*, no more, attended the lecture.

• The word *students* is modified by *only* explaining exactly how many students attended.

Five students *attended only* the lecture.

• The word *attended* is modified by *only* explaining that the lecture was the only thing the students attended.

**Rule 4:** Avoid splitting infinitives with a long modifying phrase. An infinitive is “to” + a verb: *to run, to leave, to see,* etc. An infinitive is split when a word is placed between “to” and the verb.

*Examples:* Students should try *to whenever possible get enough rest.* *(split infinitive)*

Students should try *to get enough rest whenever possible.* *(intact infinitive)*

• In the second sentence, the infinitive *to get* is kept together which is more clear.
Rule 5: **Dangling modifiers** happen when the word to be modified is absent or implied. The modifier “dangles” because it does not refer to any particular subject. Dangling modifiers often occur at the start or the end of sentences.

**Examples:** Flipping through the pages of the magazine, my eyes noticed the auto ads. (unclear)

- Eyes cannot flip through pages. To fix this sentence, an appropriate “actor” is needed (whoever is flipping the pages).

Flipping through the pages of the magazine, I noticed the auto ads. (clear)

- Adding the subject “I” makes it clear who is doing the action.

The mountains were snow-covered and cloudless, flying over the Rockies. (unclear)

- Mountains cannot fly. To fix this sentence, an appropriate “actor” is needed (whoever is flying). Placing the modifying phrase at the start of the sentence will help make it more clear.

Flying over the Rockies, we saw the snow-covered and cloudless mountains. (clear)

- Adding the subject “we” clarifies who is doing the action.

These are the basic modifier placement rules; for more complex rules, please see Writing Center staff or several handbooks available in the JCCC Writing Center.

For exercises to practice your modifier placement skills, please see Writing Center staff.