



# WRITING CENTER

## Modifiers

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Modifiers are parts of speech that give more information or descriptions to nouns or verbs in a sentence. Modifiers are found either in the adjectival or adverbial form. Generally, adjectives will modify nouns and adverbs will modify verbs. Modifiers can be single words or entire phrases.

### MISPLACED MODIFIERS

To avoid a misplaced modifier, place modifiers as close to the modified words as possible.

**Examples:** INCORRECT: The fugitive was described as a five-foot tall man with a moustache weighing 130 pounds. ***weighing 130 pounds** should be modifying **man** in this sentence, but the placement of the modifier makes it seem like the moustache weighed 130 pounds, not the man*

CORRECT: The fugitive was described as a five-foot tall man weighing 130 pounds, with a moustache.

INCORRECT: The dress is hanging on the clothesline that I have been sewing on for weeks.

CORRECT: The dress that I have been sewing on for weeks is on the clothesline.

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

**Example:** INCORRECT: Daniel, after taking a long summer vacation, had trouble adjusting to regular life as a student. *The sentence is not incorrect, but the placement of the modifier makes it awkward.*

CORRECT: After taking a long summer vacation, Daniel had trouble adjusting to regular life as a student.

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### AVOID SPLITTING INFINITIVES

Avoid splitting infinitives with a modifying phrase. An infinitive is **to** plus a verb: **to run, to leave, to see**, etc. An infinitive is split when a word is placed between **to** and the verb.

**Example:** INCORRECT: Students should try to whenever possible get enough rest.  
*This sentence has a split infinitive: **to** is split by **whenever possible** and separated from the rest of the phrase **get enough rest**.*

CORRECT: Students should try to get enough rest whenever possible.

### LIMITING MODIFIERS

For clear meaning, put limiting modifiers—such as **almost, even, just, merely, nearly, not**, and **only**—in front of or right after the words they modify.

**Note:** Limit the use of these words in academic writing, as they tend to weaken your argument.

**Example:** INCORRECT: Almost a handful of students attended the wrong lecture.  
***almost** is intended to modify the verb **attended**, so it should be placed near the verb*

CORRECT: A handful of students almost attended the wrong lecture.

### DANGLING MODIFIERS

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 and often occurs at the start or end of sentences. Dangling modifiers make the meaning of the sentence absurd because the modifier either seems to modify a word which it cannot sensibly modify, or is left without any word to modify at all. To correct a dangling modifier, either rearrange the words in the sentence or add words to make the meaning logical and clear.

**Examples:** INCORRECT: The mountains were snow-covered and cloudless, flying over the Rockies. *Mountains cannot fly, so an “actor” needs to be included in the sentence. Placing the modifying phrase at the start of the sentence clarifies the meaning.*

CORRECT: Flying over the Rockies, we saw the snow-covered and cloudless mountains.

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INCORRECT: Hopelessly baffled by the problem, our teacher was asked for the right answer.

CORRECT: Hopelessly baffled by the problem, we asked our teacher for the right answer.

### FREE MODIFIERS

Free modifiers are phrases that can appear at the beginning (initial modifier), middle (medial modifier), or end (final modifier) of sentences. These types of modifiers add detail to written work and are usually set off with commas.

Often, free modifiers can be moved to different places in the sentence, while maintaining correct grammatical formatting.

**Examples:** INITIAL MODIFIER: A comprehensive history final, the test lasted a full two hours.

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

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

At other times, changing the location of the modifier changes the meaning of the sentence.

**Examples:** INITIAL MODIFIER: Tossing her books on the table, she ran into the kitchen and grabbed a snack.

MEDIAL MODIFIER: She ran into the kitchen, tossing her books on the table, and grabbed a snack.

FINAL MODIFIER: She ran into the kitchen and grabbed a snack, tossing her book on the table.

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### PRACTICE EXERCISES

Eliminate the dangling modifiers in the following sentences by rewriting each sentence so that each modifier clearly modifies a word in the sentence. You will have to supply the words.

1. Just after eating my lunch, the telephone rang.
2. When putting on lipstick, a mirror is needed.
3. Strolling through the French Quarter, the cafes particularly impressed me.
4. Being very hungry, this sandwich looks as good as fried chicken to me.
5. When shaving, Mother often tells Dad about her plans for the day.

Underline the free modifier in the following sentences.

1. A bear, however hard he tries, grows tubby without exercise.  
—A.A. Milne, *Winnie the Pooh*
2. Ignorance, allied with power, is the most ferocious enemy justice can have.  
—James Baldwin
3. Memories, even your most precious ones, fade surprisingly quickly.  
—Kazuo Ishiguro
4. Sensing a possible rival, I watched him warily, wondering who he was.  
—Ralph Ellison