



Writing Center MUK 113 Phone 425-640-1750 Email: tutoring@edcc.edu

Finding and Fixing Dangling or Misplaced Modifier Errors

What's a Dangling or Misplaced Modifier Error?

Modifiers are words or a series of words that describe other words: something, someone, or an action. Modifiers should be placed close to what they describe or modify to avoid confusing readers about what is being modified.

- **Simple Modifier + Noun** = A large truck.
- **Complex Modifier:** Careening down the hill, the driver tried to stop the large truck.

A **Dangling or Misplaced Modifier Error** occurs when a modifier or series of modifiers are:

1. Placed too far away from the noun being described, which causes confusion about who or what is being modified, or
2. There is nothing in the sentence that can actually be modified.

Example of a Dangling Modifier Error: Walking to school today, a house burst into flames.

{This sentence suggests that the house was walking to school today, but was it possible for the house to be walking to school today? Clearly not! Someone who was walking to school saw the house burst into flames, but no person is mentioned in the sentence. Therefore, this modifier is called dangling because there is actually nothing in this sentence that it can modify.}

Correction: Walking to school today, I saw a house burst into flames.

{We made the subject of the sentence the doer of the action in the modifier. Who was walking? I was walking, so adding the subject I and the verb saw corrects this sentence.}

TIPBOX: Beginning a sentence with an introductory phrase can often lead to a dangling modifier error. You can fix this error by placing modifiers closer to the nouns they modify.

Misplaced Modifier Error: I saw a house on fire walking to school today.

{Walking to school modifies I, but its placement suggests that it modifies the house instead. In other words, it sounds as if the house on fire was walking to school. Therefore, this modifier is misplaced.}

Correction: While walking to school today, I saw a house on fire.

Misplaced Modifier Error: My instructor told me yesterday I missed a quiz.

{The modifier yesterday could be modifying the verb told in order to indicate when the instructor conveyed the information, or yesterday could be modifying missed to indicate when the speaker missed the exam.}

Correction Option 1: Yesterday, my instructor told me I missed a quiz.

Correction Option 1: My instructor told me I missed a quiz yesterday.

Misplaced Modifier Error: People who exercise often can increase their energy levels.
{The confusion is caused by two possible meanings: Do the people work out often or do they often have more energy if they work out? Does often modify exercise or increase. }

Correction Option1: People who often exercise can increase their energy level.
{This clearly shows that **often** modifies the verb **exercise** instead of the verb **increase**.}

Correction Option1: People who exercise can often increase their energy level.
{This clearly shows that **often** modifies increase instead of exercise.}

TIPBOX: Pay special attention to where you place modifiers such as:

Often, simply, hardly, barely, almost, only, nearly, merely, frequently.

These modifiers should be placed next to the words they modify in order to avoid confusion. Consider the difference between saying:

<i>She often told me she loved me.</i>	OR	<i>She told me she often loved me.</i>
<i>The exam took almost three hours</i>	OR	<i>The exam almost took three hours.</i>
<i>I went to college for nearly 8 years</i>	OR	<i>I nearly went to college or 8 years.</i>
<i>I eat chocolate cream only</i>	OR	<i>I only eat chocolate ice cream.</i>

Sentence Practice: Please identify and correct the modifier errors below:

1. While driving to the stadium , mass transit seemed like a better option.
2. People who have to drive in rush traffic frequently like to talk on their cell phones.
3. Learning to drive, my car always overheated in traffic jams.
4. It almost took an hour to cool down enough to restart each time.
5. I was nearly late to math class every day, and it showed in my low grades.
6. Approaching the airport, my long trip was over.
7. Flying for nine hours, my legs were stiff and sore.

For more practice and to test your knowledge, go to:

- Capital Community College Guide to Grammar and Writing
<http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/modifiers.htm>
- The Online Writing Lab at Purdue University
<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/597/01/>

