

Problems with Modifiers

Basic Principle: Modifiers are like teenagers: they fall in love with whatever they're next to. Make sure they're next to something they ought to modify!

 **MISPLACED MODIFIER:** Some modifiers, especially — *only, just, nearly, barely* — have a bad habit of slipping into the wrong place in a sentence. For example:
Tom *just* died wearing his running shoes. (Tom's death is recent?)
Tom died wearing *just* his running shoes. (Tom was nude when he died?)
Just Tom died wearing his running shoes. (No one else but Tom died wearing his shoes?)

Put the modifier in the right place, near the word(s) it is modifying:

Confusing: He *barely* kicked that ball twenty yards. (Can you *barely* kick something?)

Correct: He kicked that ball *barely* twenty yards.

 **DANGLING MODIFIER:** When you begin a sentence with a modifying word, phrase, or clause, make sure the next thing that comes along can be modified by that modifier. When a modifier improperly modifies something, it is called a "dangling modifier." This often happens with beginning **participial phrases**. See below: A car can't change its own oil.

Confusing: *Changing the oil every 3,000 miles, the car* seemed to run better.

Correct: *Changing the oil every 3,000 miles, Fred* could get much better gas mileage.

OR name the person doing the action in the modifier:

Correct: If Fred changes the oil every 3,000 miles, he can keep his car running well.

An infinitive phrase can also "dangle." Insert who set up the exercise program.

Confusing: *To keep the young recruits in shape, an exercise program* was set up in the summer.

Correct: *To keep the young recruits in shape, the coach* set up an exercise program in the summer.

 **SQUINTING MODIFIER:** A "**squinting modifier**" is the result of an adverb's ability to pop up almost anywhere in a sentence, which can be confusing. In the sentences below, you can't tell which part of the sentence the adverb is referring to. Try placing the modifier closer to the verb you are referring to:

Confusing: Students who seek their instructors' advice *often* can improve their grades.

(Should they seek advice often? Or can those who seek advice often improve their grades?)

Correct: Student who *often* seek their instructors' advice can improve their grades.

OR Students who seek their instructors' advice can *often* improve their grades.

Confusing: The professor said *on Friday* that we would have a test on modifiers.

(Did he say it on Friday? Or is the test on Friday?)

Correct: *On Friday*, the professor said we would have a test on modifiers.

OR: The professor said we would have a test on modifiers *on Friday*.