

Identifying Modifier Errors

A "modifier" is simply a word or phrase that describes or elaborates on another idea within a sentence. Problematic modifiers are a subset of grammatical errors that involve phrases that wind up confusing readers because it's unclear exactly what the word or phrase is describing.

- **Misplaced modifiers**, as the name suggests, are not placed closely enough to the word(s) they modify; in fact, they often seem to modify something else (which can be really confusing for readers).

It was not a good idea to serve food to the guests standing around the room on flimsy paper plates.

(Sounds like the guests are standing on paper plates!)

- **Dangling modifiers** appear in a sentence that contains no word or phrase to which the modifier can be reasonably linked.

Heading up to the mountains for the weekend, the road was covered in a thick layer of ice.

(Sounds like the road headed up the mountains.)

- **Disruptive modifiers** separate closely connected elements in a sentence, such as a subject and a verb, making the sentence difficult to read and understand.

The researcher, because he had never worked with chimpanzees before and was therefore unaware of their intelligence, was surprised when they purposely undermined the experiment he was trying to conduct.

(Because the modifier interrupts the flow of the sentence, it is hard to follow the main idea.)

- **Squinting modifiers** can refer to either the word before it or the word after it, often with two very different potential meanings.

People who enjoy listening to Aaron Copland's music often claim that he was the finest American composer of the twentieth century.

(Does this sentence mean that the people in question listen to the music often, or that they often claim something about Copland?)

Problematic modifiers can cause awkward and unclear sentences. To identify and correct problematic modifiers, try some of the suggestions below:

- Pay attention to the modifier's location. What is the modifier supposed to describe? Is it close to the word it's modifying? Is it breaking up other important parts of the sentence?
- Check modifiers at the end of sentences. Sometimes ideas occur to writers mid-sentence that don't always mesh neatly with the rest of the sentence.

- Keep an eye out for "limiting" modifiers (like only, almost, hardly, just, scarcely, merely, simply, exactly, and even). The meaning of a sentence can change dramatically depending on where in the sentence you put these words.
- Watch out for modifying phrases that begin with who, which, that, when, although, because, and while. These phrases should be placed as close as possible to the word they modify. Be especially alert for who, which, and that.
- Look for -ing words. Many dangling modifiers are caused by -ing words that are used to modify other ideas in the sentence. Whenever you use an -ing word in this way, you must make sure that the doer of the -ing word is specified as close by as possible.
 - For example, the following sentence doesn't make sense:
Jumping into the water to save the drowning swimmer, the crowd cheered the lifeguard.
(Sounds like the crowd jumped into the water)
 - To correct this sentence, you need to put "lifeguard" closer to "jumping":
Jumping into the water to save the drowning swimmer, the lifeguard was cheered by the crowd.