**Repair misplaced and dangling modifiers.**

Modifiers, whether they are single words, phrases, or clauses, should point clearly to the words they modify. As a rule, related words should be kept together.

1. **pu**t limiting modifiers in front of the words they modify.

Limiting modifiers such as *only*, *even*, *almost*, *nearly*, and *just* should appear in front of a verb only if they modify the verb:

*At first, I couldn’t even touch my toes, much less grasp them.* If they limit the meaning of some other word in the sentence, they should be placed in front of that word.

**▶ The literature reveals that students only learn new vocabulary words only when they are encouraged to read.**

*Only* limits the meaning of the *when* clause.

**▶ If you ~~just~~ interview just chemistry majors, your picture of the student body’s response to the new grading policies will be incomplete.**

The adverb *just* limits the meaning of *chemistry majors*, not *interview*.

When the limiting modifier *not* is misplaced, the sentence usually suggests a meaning the writer did not intend.

**▶ In the United States in 1860, not all black southerners were ~~not~~ slaves.**

The original sentence says that no black southerners were slaves. The revision makes the writer’s real meaning clear: Some (but not all) black southerners were slaves.

1. Place phrases and clauses so that readers can see at a glance what they modify.

Although phrases and clauses can appear at some distance from the words they modify, make sure your meaning is clear. When phrases or clauses are oddly placed, absurd misreadings can result.

MISPLACED The soccer player returned to the clinic where he had undergone emergency surgery in 2004 in a limousine sent by Adidas.

REVISED Travelling in a limousine sent by Adidas, the soccer player returned to the clinic where he had undergone emergency surgery in 2004.

The revision corrects the false impression that the soccer player underwent emergency surgery in a limousine.

**▶ There are many pictures of comedians who have performed at Gavin’s on the walls. (**The comedians weren’t performing on the walls; the pictures were on the walls.)

**On the walls, are many pictures of comedians who have performed at Gavin’s.**

**▶ The robber was described as a six-foot-tall man with a heavy mustache weighing 170 pounds. (**The robber, not the mustache, weighed 170 pounds.)

**The robber was described as a six-foot-tall man with a 170 pounds heavy mustache.**

Occasionally the placement of a modifier leads to an ambiguity — a squinting modifier. In such a case, two revisions will be possible, depending on the writer’s intended meaning.

* AMBIGUOUS: The exchange students we met for coffee occasionally questioned us about our latest slang.
* CLEAR: The exchange students we occasionally met for coffee questioned us about our latest slang.
* CLEAR: The exchange students we met for coffee questioned us occasionally about our latest slang.

In the original version, it was not clear whether the meeting or the questioning happened occasionally. Both revisions eliminate the ambiguity.

1. Move awkwardly placed modifiers.

As a rule, a sentence should flow from subject to verb to object, without lengthy detours along the way. When a long adverbial word group separates a subject from its verb, a verb from its object, or a helping verb from its main verb, the result is oft en awkward.

**▶ Hong Kong, after more than 150 years of British rule, was transferred back to Chinese control in 1997.**

There is no reason to separate the subject, *Hong Kong*, from the verb, *was transferred*, with a long phrase.

A**fter more than 150 years of British rule, Hong Kong was transferred back to Chinese control in 1997.**

N.B: English does not allow an adverb to appear between a verb and its object.

**▶ Yolanda lifted ~~easily~~ the fifty-pound weight. Yolanda easily lifted the fifty-pound weight.**

1. Avoid split infinitives when they are awkward.

An infinitive consists of *to* plus the base form of a verb: *to think*, *to breathe*, *to dance.* When a modifier appears between *to* and the verb, an infinitive is said to be “split”: *to carefully balance*, *to* *completely understand.*

When a long word or a phrase appears between the parts of the infinitive, the result is usually awkward.

**▶ The patient should try to if possible avoid going up and down stairs.**

Attempts to avoid split infi nitives can result in equally awkward sentences. When alternative phrasing sounds unnatural, most experts allow — and even encourage — splitting the infinitive.

**▶ If possible, the patient should try to avoid going up and down stairs.**

AWKWARD: We decided actually to enforce the law. BETTER: We decided to actually enforce the law.

At times, neither the split infinitive nor its alternative sounds particularly awkward. In such situations, it is usually better not to split the infinitive, especially in formal writing.

**▶ Nursing students learn to ~~accurately~~ record a patient’s vital signs.**

**▶ Nursing students learn to record a patient’s vital signs accurately.**

1. Repair dangling modifiers.

A dangling modifier fails to refer logically to any word in the sentence.

Dangling modifiers are easy to repair, but they can be hard to recognize, especially in your own writing.

**Recognizing dangling modifiers**

Dangling modifiers are usually word groups (such as verbal phrases) that suggest but do not name an actor. When a sentence opens with such a modifier, readers expect the subject of the next clause to name the actor. If it doesn’t, the modifier dangles.

**▶ Understanding the need to create checks and balances on power, the Constitution divided the government into three branches.**

**Understanding the need to create checks and balances on power, the framers of the Constitution divided the government into three branches.**

The framers of the Constitution (not the document itself ) understood the need for checks and balances.

**▶ After completing seminary training, women’s access to the priesthood has oft en been denied.**

**After completing seminary training, *women were often denied* access to the priesthood.**

Women (not their access to the priesthood) complete the training.

The following sentences illustrate four common kinds of dangling modifiers.

DANGLING *Deciding to join the navy*, the recruiter enthusiastically pumped Joe’s hand. [Participial phrase]

DANGLING *Upon entering the doctor’s office*, a skeleton caught my attention. [Preposition followed by a gerund phrase]

DANGLING *To satisfy her mother*, the piano had to be practiced every day. [Infinitive phrase]

DANGLING *Through not eligible for the clinical trial*, the doctor prescribed the drug for Ethan on compassionate grounds. [Elliptical clause with an understood subject and verb]

These dangling modifiers falsely suggest that the recruiter decided to join the navy, that the skeleton entered the doctor’s office, that the piano intended to satisfy the mother, and that the doctor was not eligible for the clinical trial.

Although most readers will understand the writer’s intended meaning in such sentences, the inadvertent humor can be distracting.

**Repairing dangling modifiers**

To repair a dangling modifier, you can revise the sentence in one of two ways:

• Name the actor in the subject of the sentence.

• Name the actor in the modifier.

Depending on your sentence, one of these revision strategies may be more appropriate than the other.

ACTOR NAMED IN SUBJECT

**▶ Upon entering the doctor’s office, a skeleton. caught my attention.**

**Upon entering the doctor’s office, *I noticed* a skeleton.**

**▶ To satisfy her mother, the piano had to be practiced every day.**

**To satisfy her mother, *Sarah had to practice* the piano every day.**

ACTOR NAMED IN MODIFIER

**▶ Deciding to join the navy, the recruiter enthusiastically pumped Joe’s hand.**

***When Joe decided* to join the navy, the recruiter enthusiastically pumped *his* hand.**

**▶ Though not eligible for the clinical trial, the doctor prescribed the drug for Ethan on compassionate grounds.**

**Though *Ethan was* not eligible for the clinical trial, the doctor prescribed the drug for *him* on compassionate grounds.**

**NOTE:** You cannot repair a dangling modifier just by moving it.

Consider, for example, the sentence about the skeleton. If you put the modifier at the end of the sentence (*A skeleton caught my attention* *upon entering the doctor’s office*), you are still suggesting — absurdly, of course — that the skeleton entered the office. The only way to avoid the problem is to put the word *I* in the sentence, either as the subject or in the modifier.

**▶ Upon entering the doctor’s office, a skeleton. ~~caught my attention~~.**

**Upon entering the doctor’s office, I *noticed* a skeleton.**

**As I entered the doctor’s office, a skeleton caught my attention.**

**EXERCISE 01:** Edit the following sentences to correct misplaced or awkwardly placed modifiers. Possible revisions appear in the back of the book. *More practice:*

**Answering questions can be annoying in a telephone survey.**

**Answering questions in a telephone survey can be annoying.**

a. More research is needed to effectively evaluate the risks posed by volcanoes in the Pacific Northwest.

b. Many students graduate with debt from college totaling more than fifty thousand dollars.

c. It is a myth that humans only use 10 percent of their brains.

d. A cool hunter is a person who can find in the unnoticed corners of modern society the next wave of fashion.

e. All geese do not fl y beyond Narragansett for the winter.

**EXERCISE 02:** Edit the following sentences to correct dangling modifiers. Most sentences can be revised in more than one way. Possible revisions appear in the back of the book. *More practice:*

**To graduate, two science courses. must be completed. To graduate, a student must complete two science courses**

a. To complete an online purchase with a credit card, the expiration date and the security code must be entered.

b. Though only sixteen, UCLA accepted Martha’s application.

c. Settled in the cockpit, the pounding of the engine was muffled only slightly by my helmet.

d. After studying polymer chemistry, computer games seemed less complex to Phuong.

e. When a young man, my mother enrolled me in tap dance classes.