

Dangling Modifiers and Misplaced Parts of Sentences

A modifier is a word that explains another word or idea in a sentence. Sometimes modifiers are misplaced in a sentence, making the intended meaning unclear or changing it completely. A good way to avoid dangling modifiers is to place the modifier next to the word it describes. This may involve restructuring your sentence; however, using this practice will eliminate confusion on the part of the reader.

Single word modifier placement changes the meaning of a sentence

Example:

Part of the school group went to a movie.

or

The school group went to part of a movie.

The location of the word “part” totally changes the meaning of the two sentences.

Example:

Suzie only baked the cake. (She didn’t mix the batter)

or

Only Suzie baked the cake. (She baked the cake by herself)

or

Suzie baked only the cake. (She didn’t bake the cookies)

Again, the placement of “only” changes the meaning of the entire sentence.

Misplaced phrases or words confuse a reader

Example:

Incorrect: *After a hard day at work, the mess hall was full of men.*

Correct: *After a hard day at work, the men gathered in the mess hall.*

Did the mess hall really have a hard day at work? No. The men in the mess hall experienced a hard day at work.

Example:

Incorrect: *From the telephone ringing, I got a headache all day long.*

Correct: *Because the phone rang all day long, I got a headache.*

Here the individual speaking did not *get* a headache all day long. Although he/she may have had the headache for that long period (all day), it came from the telephone ringing all day long.

Example:

Incorrect: *Momentarily, the driver lost control of his car and struck a fire hydrant.*

Correct: *The driver momentarily lost control of his car and struck a fire hydrant.*

In this example a reader will associate “momentarily” with “the driver” instead of with “lost control”. A good way to tell if you have placed a modifier in the correct place is to say the phrase in order and ask “momentarily the driver” or “momentarily lost control” Which phrase makes more sense?

Example:

Incorrect: *I am so hungry, when will the pizza delivery arrive?*

Correct: *When will the pizza delivery arrive? I am so hungry.*

In this sentence, “I am so hungry” is a statement, not a question. Why then is the statement behind a question mark? The sentence would be clarified if it were broken into two complete thoughts as shown above.

Resources

John, M., Yates, P. M., & De Laney, E. N. (1955). *Building Better English 10*. Evanston, IL: Row, Peterson and Co.

Purdue University Online Writing Lab (2002). *Dangling Modifiers*. Retrieved September 24, 2002, from http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/print/grammar/g_dangmod.html

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