

**INSTRUCTOR:** Modifier placement. Modifiers are adjectives and adverbs or word groups built from adjectives and adverbs that describe other words in a sentence. Adjectives modify nouns, people, places, and things, as well as pronouns. In the sentence, "Juan rode up the steep hill," the adjective steep modifies the noun hill.

Adverbs modify verbs, the action words in a sentence. They also modify adjectives and other adverbs. In the sentence, "Juan road especially slowly up the extremely steep hill," the adverb especially modifies the adverb slowly. The adverb slowly modifies the verb rode. And the adverb extremely modifies the adjective steep.

A modifier can be made up of more than just a single word, but the function, to describe nouns, verbs, and other modifiers, remains the same. "After taking antibiotics for four weeks, Kevin finally conquered his sinus infection." The word group at the beginning of the sentence modifies the noun Kevin.

To avoid confusion or misreading, modifiers must refer clearly to the words they are describing, which usually means keeping them close together. The most common modifier problems arise with misplaced modifiers, limiting modifiers, squinting adverbs, and dangling modifiers. Let's take a look at each of these situations in turn.

Misplaced modifiers are generally too far away from the words they are modifying, and they sometimes appear to modify another closer word by mistake. They can usually be fixed by being moved to a better location in the sentence. "Mark is a passionate baseball player with a strong curve ball now entering his junior year." The modifier "now entering his junior year" is misplaced, making it sound like the ball is in school.

The modifier needs to be closer to the noun Mark, which is really what is being described. "Now entering his junior year, Mark is a passionate baseball player with a strong curve ball." There is now no confusion about who is entering his junior year.

Limiting modifiers are words such as almost, just, and only that limit or qualify an

action or amount. Limiting modifiers should be placed immediately before the words they are modifying in order to clearly convey the writer's meaning. "I almost went to ten concerts last month." In this sentence, the limiting modifier almost comes just before the verb went, meaning that the writer came close to attending ten concerts but didn't actually make it to any concerts at all.

If we move the placement of almost just slightly, the sentence takes on a different meaning. "I went to almost ten concerts last month." Now the limiting modifier almost comes just before the adjective ten, meaning that the writer attended close to ten concerts, perhaps eight or nine, but not quite 10.

When an adverb can refer to one of two different words in a sentence, it is called a squinting adverb, and it can make the meaning of a sentence difficult to understand. "The students who volunteered regularly met for lunch and a matinee movie." In this sentence, the adverb regularly is squinting, because we don't know what it is referring to.

Is the writer talking about students who volunteered regularly? Or is the writer talking about volunteers who regularly met? Squinting adverbs can be fixed by being moved out of the ambiguous position. The students who regularly volunteered met for lunch and a matinee movie. This revision clearly shows that regularly modifies volunteered. "The students who volunteered met regularly for lunch and a matinee movie." This revision clearly shows that regularly modifies met.

Dangling modifiers are missing the words they modify. A modifier dangles if the action it describes has no corresponding noun in the sentence. "After setting the bone and applying the cast, I learned how to use crutches." This sentence implies illogically that the speaker I performed the action of setting the bone and applying the cast.

You can fix a dangling modifier in one of two ways. One is to revise the sentence so the modifier has a noun to describe. "After setting the bone and applying the cast, the hospital staff taught me how to use crutches." Now the modifier clearly refers to the noun staff.

The second option is to adjust the modifier so it contains a subject of its own that is performing the action. "After the hospital staff had set the bone and applied the cast, I learned how to use crutches." Now the modifier has its own subject, the hospital staff, so it no longer needs to refer to a noun elsewhere in the sentence. The long modifier now describes the verb learned.

Remember, to avoid confusion for your readers, keep modifiers close to the words they are describing and avoid ambiguous references.