MISPLACED MODIFIERS

A misplaced modifier is a word, phrase or clause that is awkwardly placed in the sentence so that it does not describe what the writer wanted it to describe. In other words, a misplaced modifier is placed so that it does not modify what it is intended to modify.

To avoid this problem, place a modifier as close as possible to the word it modifies.

MISPLACED MODIFIER: Jeff bought an old jeep from a crooked dealer with a faulty transmission.

Did the jeep or the crooked dealer have a faulty transmission? Yes, it was the jeep; therefore, the modifying phrase is awkwardly placed. The phrase with a faulty transmission should be next to the word jeep, the word it modifies.

CORRECTED MODIFIER: Jeff bought an old jeep with a faulty transmission from a crooked dealer.

As you can see, many misplaced modifiers actually cause a sentence to be quite funny; unfortunately, the reader may not have a sense of humor!

MISPLACED MODIFIER: Sam screamed at the barking dog in his underwear.

Now, really, did the dog wear underwear?

CORRECTED EXAMPLE: Sam, in his underwear, screamed at the barking dog.

Modifying words and phrases should be as close as possible to the word they describe, preferably right next to the word they describe. Modifiers may be placed either before or after the word they describe, but the location may change the meaning of the sentence.

MISPLACED MODIFIER: Frances nearly earned fifty dollars.

Frances earned nothing because she just couldn't nearly earn. The modifier must be moved. Frances did not nearly earn; she earned nearly fifty. The modifier nearly is describing how many dollars she earned and thus should be placed next to the word fifty.

CORRECTED EXAMPLE: Frances earned nearly fifty dollars.

Depending on where they are placed in the sentence, the words “nearly” and “only” can change the meaning of a sentence. Consider John and his books:

Only John carried his books to class.
John only carried his books to class.
John carried only his books to class.
John carried his books only to class.

DANGLING MODIFIERS

A modifying phrase or clause is said to dangle when it has no stated word to describe. A dangling modifier is sometimes difficult to identify because our brains supply the missing word. To correct a dangling modifier, you must rewrite the sentence and supply the word that is to be modified.

DANGLING MODIFIER: While smoking a pipe, my cat curled up next to me.

Did the cat smoke the pipe? Obviously not, but the sentence does not identify who smoked the pipe. You must supply a subject and, sometimes, supply additional words to create verbs, clauses or phrases. In the following sentences the new subject and additional words are in bold letters.

CORRECTED EXAMPLE: While I was smoking a pipe, my cat curled up next to me. OR While smoking a pipe, I allowed my cat to curl up next to me.

DANGLING MODIFIER: Climbing the mountain, a rock hit John's head.

Who was climbing the mountain? The rock? Jim? We must rewrite the sentence for clarity.

CORRECTED EXAMPLE: When John was climbing the mountain, a rock hit his head. OR Climbing the mountain, John was hit on the head by a rock.

DANGLING MODIFIER: Being out of order, the president asked me to sit down.

Who was being out of order? The president? Me? Rewrite the sentence.

CORRECTED EXAMPLE: Being out of order, I was asked by the president to sit down. OR Because I was out of order, the president asked me to sit down.
EXERCISE 1: First, underline the modifying phrase and circle the word it modifies. Then, rewrite the sentence so that the modifying phrase is as close as possible to the word it describes. *Note: Some sentences contain two modifying phrases.* Check your answers in the back of this handout.

1. Jack walked into only the house of horrors.
2. She almost needed one day to complete the assignment.
3. Her boyfriend opened the door with a wicked smile.
4. We nearly waited one month for the answer to our questions.
5. My friend took me for a ride after showering and shaving on the skyway.
6. On the way to the movie, a bee stung Dean.
7. The cat should be treated by a veterinarian that has worms.
8. The house in the Arlington area faces the river which Mr. Smith bought.
9. After reaching a weight of 275 pounds, the doctor insisted that Mr. Wright go on a strict diet.
10. Shane washed her hair when she finished eating with a new shampoo.

EXERCISE 2: The following sentences contain dangling modifiers. You will have to supply a subject and rewrite the sentence so that the modifying phrase is in the correct location to describe its subject. Check your answers in the back of this handout.

1. While sweeping the floor, the stew boiled over on the stove.
2. To write correctly, proper English should be used.
3. After putting a new ribbon in the printer, my papers looked better.
4. While washing his brother’s car, a scratch was discovered on the bumper.
5. Thinking of something else, the instructor's voice surprised me.
6. While writing my paper, the telephone rang.
7. To understand our new policy, the LAC’s brochures were read.
8. Being short of money, an inexpensive restaurant had to be found.
9. On coming back to school after vacation, a new work schedule was developed.
10. By jogging five miles a day a toned body was insured.
EXERCISE 3: The following sentences contain either misplaced or dangling modifiers. Rewrite the sentences to correct the problems. Check your answers in the back of this handout.

1. I found a hawk's nest near the river in a tree.
2. A man and his dog ran around the building with a red leather collar.
3. I heard that our school needs additional instructors on the television news.
4. Hoping to make a profit, the stock market became Carol's interest.
5. Coretta bought a pit bull dog alarmed by the robberies in her neighborhood.

ANSWERS TO EXERCISES:

EXERCISE 1: The modifying phrase is underlined, and the word it modifies is in parentheses to indicate a circle. If the sentence contains a second modifier, it is indicated by italics. In the second sentence of each pair, the corrections are shown in bolded letters.

1. (Jack) walked into only the house of horrors.  
   Only Jack walked into the house of horrors.
2. She almost needed (one) day to complete the assignment.  
   She needed almost one day to complete the assignment.
3. Her (boyfriend) opened the door with a wicked smile.  
   With a wicked smile, her boyfriend opened the door.
4. We nearly waited (one) month for the answer to our questions.  
   We waited nearly one month for the answer to our questions.
5. My (friend) took me for a ((ride)) after showering and shaving on the skyway.  
   After showering and shaving, my friend took me for a ride on the skyway.  
   Note there are two modifying phrases that must be placed correctly.
6. On the way to the movie, a bee stung (Dean).  
   A bee stung Dean on the way to the movie.
7. The (cat) should be treated by a veterinarian that has worms.  
   The cat that has worms should be treated by a veterinarian.
8. The (house) in the Arlington area faces the river which Mr. Smith bought.
The house in the Arlington area, which Mr. Smith bought, faces the river.

Note that this sentence contains a modifying phrase, in the Arlington area, and a modifying clause, which Mr. Smith bought.

9. **After reaching a weight of 275 pounds**, the doctor insisted that (Mr. Wright) go on a strict diet.
   The doctor insisted that **Mr. Wright, after reaching a weight of 275 pounds**, go on a strict diet.

10. (Shane) washed her (**hair**) when she finished eating with a new shampoo.
    **When she finished eating, Shane** washed her **hair with a new shampoo**.
    Note that there are two modifying phrases that must be placed correctly.

**EXERCISE 2:** Your answers may differ from those listed below; however, your answers are correct if the modifying phrase is next to the word it modifies. If you are unsure of your answers, ask a tutor to check them for you.

1. While sweeping the floor, I let the stew boil over on the stove.
2. To write correctly, students should use proper English.
3. After putting a new ribbon in the printer, I discovered that my papers looked better.
4. Dan, while washing his brother’s car, discovered a scratch on the bumper.
5. Thinking of something else, I was surprised by the instructor's voice.
6. While writing my paper, I heard the telephone ring.
7. To understand our new policy, Susan read the LAC's brochures.
8. Being short of money, we had to find an inexpensive restaurant.
9. On coming back to school after vacation, the manager developed a new work schedule.
10. By jogging five miles a day, the athlete insured himself a toned body.

**EXERCISE 3:**

1. I found a hawk’s nest in a tree near the river.
2. A man and his dog with a red leather collar ran around the building.

3. I heard on the television news that our school needs additional instructors.

4. Hoping to make a profit, Carol became interested in the stock market.

5. Alarmed by the robberies in her neighborhood, Coretta bought a pit bull dog

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Websites for Practice and Understanding Misplaced Modifiers

http://leo.stcloudstate.edu/grammar/modifiers.html
Good information for Literacy Education Online regarding what misplaced modifiers are! Read and learn!

http://aliscot.com/bigdog/misplaced.htm
Big Dog Grammar’s explanation of misplaced modifiers. Take the Self-Test to check your understanding, please.

http://www.arts.uottawa.ca/writcent/hypergrammar/msplmod.html
University of Ottawa information of what it means to “have misplaced modifiers”.

http://writing2.richmond.edu/writing/wweb/mismod.html
University of Richmond’s website gives an outstanding explanation of what misplaced modifiers really are.

http://wwwnew.towson.edu/ows/moduleDangling.htm
Towson Education has good material to explain what a misplaced modifier is. Built into this material are several Practice Exercises.

http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/cgi-shl/quiz.pl/modifier_quiz.htm
Quiz on misplaced modifiers. Take this and see how far you have come in your understanding!