Modifier Mistakes

A modifier is a word, clause, or phrase that modifies, or further describes, another word or group of words in a sentence. A modifier is best placed directly next to the word or phrase for which it gives more information. When a modifier is misplaced, the reader is unsure about the meaning of the sentence. Read below to identify modifiers and determine why they can cause confusion when misplaced.

In this handout, modifiers are underlined for clarification, and in solutions, what is being modified is bolded. *Note: All solutions are possible revisions. There is no single correct revision.

Mistake 1: A misplaced modifier modifies the wrong word or phrase.

Wrong: Joseph was able to break dance on a table with a broken leg.

Explanation: Because of where the modifying phrase is placed in the sentence, it sounds as if the table had a broken leg, not Joseph. How can we clarify that Joseph was the one with a broken leg?

Solution: The most common way to correct a misplaced modifier is to place the word being modified right next to the modifier. You could rephrase the sentence as follows: “Even with a broken leg, Joseph was able to break dance on the table.”

Wrong: Panting and out of breath from running, the whole class stared at the disheveled latecomer.

Explanation: It sounds like the whole class is panting and out of breath. How can we clarify that the latecomer is the one who is panting and out of breath?

Solution: When using an introductory phrase, the word it modifies should come right after the phrase. You could rephrase the sentence as follows: “Panting and out of breath from running, the disheveled latecomer received stares from the class.”

Mistake 2: A dangling modifier has nothing to modify.

Wrong: While playing an intense game of ping pong, the ball flew out and hit the referee.

Explanation: There is no actor playing the ping pong game. The opening phrase makes it sound as if the ball was playing an intense game of ping pong.

Solution: The first way to correct a dangling modifier is to add the actor into the opening group of words. You could rephrase the sentence as follows: While Billy was playing an intense game of ping pong, the ball flew out and hit the referee.

Wrong: Having done homework all night, it was time for some TV.

Explanation: There is no statement of who is doing homework.
Solution: The second way to correct a dangling modifier is to place the word being described right after the opening group of words. You could rephrase the sentence as follows: After doing homework all night, Donna thought it was time for some TV.

Mistake 3: A squinting modifier sounds as if it could logically modify two phrases or words.

Wrong: The critics watched the movie excitedly taking notes.

Explanation: It is unclear whether the critics are excited about taking notes or watching the movie.

Solution: Move the adverb directly next to the action it describes. If the critics are excitedly taking notes, you could rephrase the sentence as follows: While watching the movie, the critics excitedly took notes. If the critics are excitedly watching the movie, you could rephrase the sentence as follows: While excitedly watching the movie, the critics took notes.