Modifiers

What is a modifier?

Modifiers are words or phrases that give additional detail about the subject discussed in a sentence.

Without modifiers, sentences would be no fun to read. Take a look at this “dead” sentence:

- Mary discarded her sandwich.

Carefully chosen, well-placed modifiers allow you to depict situations with as much accuracy as possible.

- Poor Mary, who just wanted a quick meal to get through her three-hour Math class, quickly discarded her sandwich on the cafeteria tray, gagging with disgust as a worm wiggled out of her bread, a sight making her swear off sandwiches ever again.

Modifiers can be adjectives, adjective clauses, adverbs, adverb clauses, infinitive phrases, participle phrases, and prepositional phrases.

Adjective: Poor, Adjective Clauses: who just wanted a quick meal, Adverbs: quickly, Adverb clause: as a worm wiggled out of her bread, Infinitive phrases: to get though her three-hour Math class, Participle phrase: gagging with disgust, Prepositional phrase: on the cafeteria tray.

Dangers with modifiers:

Misplaced Modifiers:

A misplaced modifier is a word, phrase, or clause that does not clearly relate to what it is intended to modify. In other words, a misplaced modifier makes the meaning of a sentence ambiguous or wrong.

There are three types of Misplaced Modifiers:

a. Misplacing limiting modifiers
b. Squinting modifiers
c. Dangling modifiers
Modifiers

Misplacing limiting modifiers:
A misplaced modifier is a modifier that misses its intended target. They are those that modify the wrong thing.

Wrong Sentence:
• Growling and snapping the lady was stalked by the werewolf.

Was the lady growling and snapping?
Growling and snapping modify the headword “lady”. The modifiers are misplaced.

Correct sentence:
• The lady was stalked by the growling and snapping werewolf.

Now growling and snapping modify the correct headword, “werewolf.”

Place the modifier in front of the word you wish to modify.

Squinting Modifiers:
They are modifiers that may modify more than one word or phrase in a sentence.

Wrong Sentence:
• She said on Sunday she would call.

Did she say it on Sunday? Or is she going to call on Sunday?
We don’t know. The phrase “on Sunday” could modify “said” or it could modify “would call.”

Correct sentence:
• On Sunday she said she would call.
• She said she would call on Sunday.
Modifiers

Dangling Modifiers:
A dangling modifier is a modifier that does not logically modify anything in the sentence. A dangling modifier is usually created because the sentence lacks a subject.

Wrong Sentence:
• When in diapers, my mother remarried.

The first clause has no subject to attach the modifier to, so the reader attaches it to the only subject available “mother.”

Correct Sentence:
• When I was in diapers, my mother remarried.

To prevent dangling modifiers, place the modifier in its proper position in a sentence.

TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE:
Select the correct sentence:

1. a) My family saw a monkey on vacation in Australia.
   b) On vacation in Australia, my family saw a monkey.

2. a) Cycling up hills strengthens your quadriceps quickly.
   b) Cycling up hills quickly strengthens your quadriceps.

3. a) Having read your letter, my dog will be taken to the vet for a test.
   b) Having read your letter, I will take my dog to the vet for a test.

4. a) He only eats ice-cream.
   b) He eats only ice-cream.

Answer Key:
1. b  2. a  3. b  4. b

Reference: The following works were referred to during the creation of this handout: Grammar Bytes: The Modifier.