

R U L E S

For Finding and Fixing Misplaced and Dangling Modifiers

Understand the problem.

Think of modifiers as arrows and the words they describe as bull's-eyes. For clear, logical sentences, writers aim modifiers so that they strike as close to the intended targets as possible.

Sneering with superiority, Roland drank iced tea from a crystal ***glass which sparkled in the afternoon sun.***

Sneering with superiority, a participle phrase, describes ***Roland***, the noun right after it. ***Which sparkled in the afternoon sun***, an adjective clause, describes ***glass***, the word in front.

When a writer's aim is off and too much distance separates the modifier from its target, the result is a misplaced modifier.

Sucking warm water from a rubber hose, envious
looks were shot Roland's way as the other picnickers quenched their own thirst.

Sucking warm water from a rubber hose, a participle phrase, should describe ***picnickers***, but since that noun is so far away, the phrase seems to be modifying ***envious looks***, which don't have mouths that can suck water!

If the sentence fails to include a target, the modifier is dangling.

With a sigh of pleasure, consumption of cucumber sandwiches commenced.

We assume that Roland is the one sighing with pleasure and eating cucumber sandwiches, but notice that he's not in the sentence, so we can't tell for sure!

Know the solution.

Misplaced and dangling modifiers make sentences awkward and inelegant. They keep sentences from expressing clear, straightforward ideas. When you discover a misplaced or dangling modifier in a sentence, you will need to rearrange and/or revise the sentence parts to untangle the idea the sentence wants to express.

Misplaced Modifiers

Rearranging sentence parts will often fix a misplaced modifier. Remember that most modifiers come as close to their targets as possible:

Sucking warm water from a rubber hose, the other picnickers quenched their own thirst as they shot envious looks Roland's way.

Now we have picnickers drinking from the rubber hose, which is clear and logical!

Dangling Modifiers

To fix a dangling modifier, you will need to add a target to the sentence and then tweak the remaining words to make sense:

With a sigh of pleasure, **Roland** began to consume cucumber sandwiches.

After **Roland** sighed with pleasure, he began to consume cucumber sandwiches.

Now we know who got to eat that delicious snack!



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