

The Modifier

Recognize a *modifier* when you see one.

Modifiers are words, phrases, or clauses that provide description in sentences. Modifiers allow writers to take the picture that they have in their heads and transfer it accurately to the heads of their readers. Essentially, modifiers breathe life into sentences. Take a look at this "dead" sentence:

Stephen dropped his fork.

Now read what several well placed modifiers can do:

Poor ***Stephen***, who just wanted a quick meal to get through his three-hour biology lab, quickly ***dropped his fork*** on the cafeteria tray, gagging with disgust as a tarantula wiggled out of his cheese omelet, a sight requiring a year of therapy before Stephen could eat eggs again.

Modifiers can be adjectives, adjective clauses, adverbs, adverb clauses, absolute phrases, infinitive phrases, participle phrases, and prepositional phrases. The sentence above contains at least one example of each:

Adjective = ***poor***.

Adjective clause = ***who just wanted a quick meal***.

Adverb = ***quickly***.

Adverb clause = ***as a tarantula wiggled out of his cheese omelet***.

Absolute phrase = ***a sight requiring a year of therapy before Stephen could eat eggs again***.

Infinitive phrase = ***to get through his three-hour biology lab***.

Participle phrase = ***gagging with disgust***.

Prepositional phrase = ***on the cafeteria tray***.

Without modifiers, sentences would be no fun to read. Carefully chosen, well-placed modifiers allow you to depict situations with as much accuracy as words will allow.



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Grammar Worksheets: Misplaced and Dangling Participles

<http://www.grammar-worksheets.com>

Many students do not understand the difference between a participle and a gerund. Here is the answer:

Gerund: A verb form used as a noun. It ends in ing – always.
Participle: A verb form used as an adjective. It usually ends in ing, en, or ed.

However, a gerund and a participle may look exactly the same, like so:

Gerund: Laughing makes me cry sometimes.
Participle: Laughing, Julio stumbled out of the bar.

Gerunds take care of themselves. Rarely do students write confusing sentences using gerunds. Participles, however, can “dangle” or be misplaced.

Dangling Participle: Slipping on the wet sidewalk, the keys fell from Amaury’s pocket.

This sentence reads as if the keys slipped on the wet sidewalk. Dangling and misplaced participles often give rise to absurdly humorous scenarios. A “dangling participle” has no noun in the sentence to which the participle would logically attach. A “misplaced participle” does have a noun, but that noun does not come directly after the participle, thus creating a confusing sentence. For our purposes, “dangling” and “misplaced” are equivalent.

How Do We Correct a Misplaced or Dangling Participle?

Given the infinite combinations and permutations available in the English language, we have several ways of correcting a misplaced or dangling participle. We will illustrate, however, only three.

1. Turn the Misplaced or Dangling Participle Into a Dependent Clause.

This means that you take the ing word (the participle), give it a subject, turn it into a verb, and attach it to the main clause. Let’s take the example above, with Amaury’s unfortunate slip on the wet sidewalk.

Correct: When Amaury slipped on the wet sidewalk, the keys fell from his pocket.

Here we have taken the original participial phrase (Slipping on the wet sidewalk), and we have turned it into a dependent clause. We understand that “Amaury slipped,” not the keys.

2. Make the Thing Being Modified by the Participle, the Subject of the Main Clause.

This means we take what is being modified by the ing phrase and place it first in the sentence, right after the comma. Again, let’s use the example of Amaury’s unfortunate slip.

Correct: Slipping on the wet sidewalk, Amaury lost his keys when they fell from his pocket.

Note that “Amaury,” the person, NOT “Amaury’s keys” is placed after the comma. You may be tempted to write “Amaury’s keys,” but then you would have the same problem. Keys, even “Amaury’s keys,” do not slip on wet sidewalks; people, like Amaury, do.

3. Place the Participle as Close as Logically Possible to the Noun it Modifies.

Misplaced: Crying and screaming, Mrs. Williams led three-year old Mindy away from the toy store.

Correct: Mrs. Williams led three-year old Mindy, crying and screaming, away from the toy store.

Grammar Worksheets: Misplaced and Dangling Participles

Exercises: Rewrite each sentence to eliminate any misplaced or dangling participles.

1. Shaken, not stirred, James Bond likes his martinis.

2. While driving to the Homestead Campus, a pillow fell from James's car.

3. Shocked by the foul language on television, the remote control dropped from Aunt Sherry's hand.

4. Running across Tropical Park, the paddle boats on the lake appeared to be floating on air.

5. Attacked by the school bully, the backpack fell from Abner's shoulder.

6. Walking barefoot through the tall grass, dew drops felt good between my toes.

7. Driven by insatiable ambition and greed, the computer ran Henry's stock trading program all day.

8. Confused by the new layout of the house, the soiled diaper fell off the baby as he cried and ran from room to room.

9. Staring up at the tall buildings, the wallet fell from Jasmine's purse.

Commonly misplaced modifiers:

| | | | |
|------|--------|--------|--------|
| only | Almost | even | hardly |
| just | Merely | nearly | simply |

Place them with the word or expression they modify.

- ☐ I only need to read the first four chapters. (*Only* modifies *need*)
- ☐ I need to only read the first four chapters. (*Only* modifies *read*)
- ☐ I need to read only the first four chapters. (*Only* modifies *the first four chapters*)

Notice the slight difference in meaning depending on the placement of the modifier in these sentences:

We *almost finished* the race at three o'clock. (We were near the end of the race at three.)

We finished the race at *almost* three o'clock. (We were at the end just before three.)

Only Jock dreams of meeting a pleasant, friendly girl. (*No one else has this dream.*)

Jock *only* dreams of meeting a pleasant, friendly girl. (*He dreams about it, but doesn't do anything about it.*)

Jock dreams *only* of meeting only a pleasant, friendly girl. (*It's the only dream he ever has.*)

Jock dreams of meeting *only* a pleasant, friendly girl. (*He dreams of meeting this one person.*)

Those darned participles!

A particularly tricky type of modifier is called a participle. Participles act like adjectives.

Participles are actually part verb/part modifier; in other words, they are formed from verbs.

Past participles are *regular* for many verbs (e.g. looked, glanced, closed); some are *irregular* (e.g. seen, flown, written). Present participles always end in *-ing*.

Complete the missing parts of the following table:

| Verb | Past (or Passive) participle | Present (or Active Participle) |
|-------|------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Fly | | |
| See | Seen | Seeing |
| | Taught | |
| | | Ringing |
| | Divided | |
| Swim | | |
| | | Freezing |
| | Moved | |
| Hit | | |
| | | Organizing |
| | | Learning |
| Steal | | |
| | Caught | |
| Ski | | |
| Give | | |
| | | Writing |
| Arise | | |
| Cut | | |
| | | Broadcasting |

What is a dangler?

Occasionally a participle shows up in the wrong place in a sentence, or it appears without anything to modify. As a result, the meaning of the entire sentence becomes skewed as in the following examples:

- ☹ *Lined up* along the telephone wires, we saw hundreds of blackbirds. (*lined up* appears to modify *we*)
- ☺ We saw hundreds of blackbirds *lined up* along the telephone wires.
- ☹ By *proofreading* your assignments, your marks will improve. (Who's doing the *proofreading*? Not the assignments; not the marks)
- ☹ By *proofreading* your assignments, it will improve your marks. (*Proofreading* appears to modify *it*; *it* is a vague pronoun with no antecedent.)
- ☺ By *proofreading* your assignments, *you* will improve your marks.

- ☹ After *hunting* for days, the ring was finally found. (The *ring* is apparently doing the *hunting*)
- ☺ After *hunting* for days, Romeo finally found the ring.

NOTE: Dangling modifier errors seem to occur most often when a sentence begins with the participle: *By leaving....After finishing....By studying...When completing...* Keep a close eye on sentences that you begin this way.

Modifiers other than participles can turn up in the wrong place in your sentence. These may result in (unintended) humorous word pictures.

Examples

- ☹ Please ask customers to smoke outside *politely*. (misplaced *adverb*)
- ☹ Please point out the No Smoking signs if you see a customer smoking *in a polite way*. (misplaced *adverb phrase*)
- ☺ Please point out the No Smoking signs politely if you see a customer smoking.

- ☹ FOR SALE: Four kitchen chairs by a furniture salesman *with some legs missing*. (misplaced *adjective phrase*)

- ☹ As a new graduate, his grandmother gave him an heirloom fountain pen. (misplaced *prepositional phrase*: Is the grandmother the new graduate?)
- ☺ Benji's grandmother gave him an heirloom fountain pen when he was a new graduate.

- ☹ Being the manager, *it* was important for the schedules to be up to date. (misplaced participle. This is a common error in which the pronoun *it* has no antecedent.)
- ☺ Being the manager, Jacob had to make sure the schedules were up to date.
- ☺ Since Jacob was the manager, he had to make sure the schedules were up to date.

Identifying Modifier Errors

A "modifier" is simply a word or phrase that describes or elaborates on another idea within a sentence. Problematic modifiers are a subset of grammatical errors that involve phrases that wind up confusing readers because it's unclear exactly what the word or phrase is describing.

- **Misplaced modifiers**, as the name suggests, are not placed closely enough to the word(s) they modify; in fact, they often seem to modify something else (which can be really confusing for readers).

It was not a good idea to serve food to the guests standing around the room on flimsy paper plates.

(Sounds like the guests are standing on paper plates!)

- **Dangling modifiers** appear in a sentence that contains no word or phrase to which the modifier can be reasonably linked.

Heading up to the mountains for the weekend, the road was covered in a thick layer of ice.

(Sounds like the road headed up the mountains.)

- **Disruptive modifiers** separate closely connected elements in a sentence, such as a subject and a verb, making the sentence difficult to read and understand.

The researcher, because he had never worked with chimpanzees before and was therefore unaware of their intelligence, was surprised when they purposely undermined the experiment he was trying to conduct.

(Because the modifier interrupts the flow of the sentence, it is hard to follow the main idea.)

- **Squinting modifiers** can refer to either the word before it or the word after it, often with two very different potential meanings.

People who enjoy listening to Aaron Copland's music often claim that he was the finest American composer of the twentieth century.

(Does this sentence mean that the people in question listen to the music often, or that they often claim something about Copland?)

Problematic modifiers can cause awkward and unclear sentences. To identify and correct problematic modifiers, try some of the suggestions below:

- Pay attention to the modifier's location. What is the modifier supposed to describe? Is it close to the word it's modifying? Is it breaking up other important parts of the sentence?
- Check modifiers at the end of sentences. Sometimes ideas occur to writers mid-sentence that don't always mesh neatly with the rest of the sentence.

- Keep an eye out for "limiting" modifiers (like only, almost, hardly, just, scarcely, merely, simply, exactly, and even). The meaning of a sentence can change dramatically depending on where in the sentence you put these words.
- Watch out for modifying phrases that begin with who, which, that, when, although, because, and while. These phrases should be placed as close as possible to the word they modify. Be especially alert for who, which, and that.
- Look for -ing words. Many dangling modifiers are caused by -ing words that are used to modify other ideas in the sentence. Whenever you use an -ing word in this way, you must make sure that the doer of the -ing word is specified as close by as possible.
 - For example, the following sentence doesn't make sense:
 Jumping into the water to save the drowning swimmer, the crowd cheered the lifeguard.
 (Sounds like the crowd jumped into the water)
 - To correct this sentence, you need to put "lifeguard" closer to "jumping":
 Jumping into the water to save the drowning swimmer, the lifeguard was cheered by the crowd.

Recognizing misplaced and dangling modifiers exercise:

Each of the flowing sentences contains an underlined phrase or clause. Indicate whether the modifier is misplaced, dangling, or correct.

1. Flying over the countryside, the cars and houses looked like toys.
2. The messenger spoke to the receptionist who delivered the package.
3. The golfer made a hole-in-one with the green-and-white umbrella.
4. Without thinking what might be on the menu, Hugh told his hostess that he hated broccoli.
5. After studying hard, the test was a breeze.
6. With my small allowance, the tickets were too expensive.
7. The right belongs to every American to vote in elections.
8. The house was rebuilt by the new owners destroyed by the fire.
9. At camp, home seemed very far away.
10. After finishing the dishes, we were ready to relax for the evening.

DANGLING AND MISPLACED MODIFIERS

Dangling Modifiers are words or phrases that do not have a clear term to modify in a sentence. Often, they can be found at the beginning of sentences, though they can also appear at a sentence's end. They frequently include an -ing word (gerund) and to + verb (infinitive) phrase near the start of a sentence.

Misplaced Modifiers are words or phrases that do not clearly point to the word or phrase they modify, in this way obscuring meaning.

Directions: In the blank beside each sentence, indicate whether that sentence contains a dangling modifier (DM) or a misplaced modifier (MM). Then rewrite the sentence to correct it. Check the answers by using the key below. Because rewritten sentences will vary, have a writing counselor check your new sentences for you.

Examples:

a. At the age of six, my mother sang hymns to me. DM
Correction: When I was six, my mother sang hymns to me.

b. We were told at midnight the concert would begin. MM
Correction: We were told the concert would begin at midnight.

1. The car on the bridge which is green is mine. _____
2. Expecting confusion, our plans were made. _____
3. Feeling hot, sweaters were taken off. _____
4. I showed my dog to the veterinarian with the fleas. _____
5. Larry told me he was getting married that afternoon at night. _____
6. This typewriter is used by a secretary with a wide carriage. _____
7. Swimming out into the sea, the current grew stronger. _____
8. Walking along the bridge, a ship suddenly appeared. _____
9. The Honda was stalled on the road out of oil. _____
10. He kept a black book of all the girls he had dated in his desk. _____
11. On entering the room, the messages are easily seen. _____
12. While at the park, the sun shone brightly on the sunbathers. _____
13. Mary should jump at whatever is demanded quickly. _____
14. He kept all his medicine in the medicine cabinet that had been prescribed for him. _____
15. When only a baby, Mom took me scuba diving. _____

ANSWERS:

- | | | | |
|-------|-------|--------|--------|
| 1. MM | 5. MM | 9. MM | 13. MM |
| 2. DM | 6. MM | 10. MM | 14. MM |
| 3. DM | 7. DM | 11. DM | 15. DM |
| 4. MM | 8. DM | 12. DM | |

MISPLACED MODIFIERS WORKSHEET

Write "C" if the modifier is correctly placed. Write "MM" if it is misplaced. Then, in the "MM" sentences, circle the modifier and draw an arrow to show where it should go.

- _____ 1. The man was stopped for speeding in the blue sweater.
- _____ 2. I almost saw the whole movie, but I fell asleep around midnight.
- _____ 3. Joe promised to mow the lawn running out the door.
- _____ 4. The initials were those of the lovers carved on the tree.
- _____ 5. There are only two parking spaces left in the lot.
- _____ 6. Every four hours the doctor told him to take a pill.
- _____ 7. Sitting on the porch, I smoked my last cigarette.
- _____ 8. The woman walked toward us wearing the feather hat.
- _____ 9. The jet crashed into a cliff carrying 155 passengers.
- _____ 10. I hardly ate any breakfast.
- _____ 11. I watched the mechanic fix the car with admiration.
- _____ 12. I earn fifty dollars a week scarcely.
- _____ 13. Reaching into the cupboard, I found the bag of cookies.
- _____ 14. We borrowed a mower from a neighbor that was broken.
- _____ 15. Climbing up the telephone pole, we saw a squirrel.
- _____ 16. Mel, running rapidly, disappeared around the bend.
- _____ 17. The cat was rescued after the building had been set on fire by a fireman.
- _____ 18. We've almost found all the pieces to the puzzle.
- _____ 19. She vowed on her birthday to go on a diet.
- _____ 20. We need gas badly.

ANSWERS:

- | | |
|---|-------------------------------------|
| 1. MM man (in the blue sweater) | 11. MM (With admiration,) I watched |
| 2. MM saw (almost) the whole | 12. MM earn (scarcely) fifty |
| 3. MM (Running out the door,) Joe | 13. C |
| 4. MM initials (carved on the tree) were | 14. MM mower (that was broken) |
| 5. C | 15. MM (We saw a squirrel) climbing |
| 6. MM pill (every four hours.) | 16. C |
| 7. C | 17. MM rescued (by a fireman) |
| 8. MM woman (wearing the feathered hat) | 18. MM found (almost) all |
| 9. MM jet crashed (carrying 155 passengers) | 19. MM vowed (to go on a diet) |
| 10. MM ate (hardly) any | 20. MM We (badly) need |

DANGLING MODIFIERS WORKSHEET

Draw one line under the dangling modifier in each of the following sentences.

1. Driving in heavy traffic, my head started to ache.
2. Fishing for trout, our boat tipped over.
3. Crossing the border, my bags were searched.
4. Searching my wallet, my driver's license was found.
5. A shovel was used, building the sand castle.

ANSWERS:

1. Driving in heavy traffic, my head started to ache.
2. Fishing for trout, our boat tipped over.
3. Crossing the border, my bags were searched.
4. Searching my wallet, my driver's license was found.
5. A shovel was used, building the sand castle.

Write "DM" if the modifier is dangling or "C" if it has a subject to refer to and the sentence is correct. Underline the subject.

- _____ 1. Chasing his sister, Billy fell and bruised his knee.
- _____ 2. Feeling nervous, nails were bitten.
- _____ 3. Running scared, the cat climbed up the tree.
- _____ 4. Laughing hysterically, the joke was repeated.
- _____ 5. Slipping on the ice, her leg was broken.

ANSWERS:

1. C 2. DM 3. C 4. DM 5. C

In all of the following sentences, there are modifiers that do not apply clearly to the word they modify. Underline the subject and rewrite the sentence, making the modifier apply clearly to the word it modifies. If there is no subject, supply an appropriate one. Please have a writing counselor check the remaining exercises.

1. Reaching the finals, the game was won by the Tigers.

_____.

2. Playing skillfully, a touchdown was made by the home team.

_____.

3. Raising his hand, the question was answered by Joe.

_____.

4. Planting vegetables, her knees got dirty.

_____.

5. Speaking for the community, the issue was raised by Mrs. Santos.

_____.

Correct the following sentences by changing the dangling modifier into a dependent clause. Rewrite the entire sentence in the space provided.

1. Fooling around, the lamps got broken.

_____.

2. Dashing through the snow, a stone upset the sleigh.

_____.

3. Driving home, our car got a flat tire.

_____.

4. Waiting for my friend, the weather turned bad.

_____.

5. Taking out the garbage, snow started to fall.

_____.

Complete these sentences.

1. Since moving to Nebraska, _____.

2. Before putting on a show, _____.

3. While waiting for the Sears man, _____.

4. By having the oil filter changed, _____.

5. On hearing about your divorce, _____.

Complete these sentences.

1. To appreciate the music, _____.

2. To get a raise, _____.

3. To have a successful barbecue, _____.

4. To get to know people, _____.

5. To understand the stock market, _____.