

DON'T LET YOUR MODIFIERS DANGLE IN POLITE SOCIETY

"Always suspect an -ing word of dangling if it's near the front of a sentence; consider it guilty until proved innocent."

--Patricia O'Connor

Conventionally, a participial phrase, prepositional phrase, infinitive phrase, or an appositive phrase modifies the nearest noun in the *same* sentence. The same is true for adjectival or adverbial phrases. If that noun appears in an earlier sentence, or doesn't appear at all in the paper, the reader will become confused. This situation is called a "dangling modifier." In the case of adverbs, adverbs should modify the nearest adverb in the *same* sentence. If not, it also is a dangling modifier.

Examples of Dangling Modifiers

I was late for the school bus again. Running for the bus, my book fell in the mud.
(Was the book running for the school bus? It's the only nearby noun beside "mud.")

Deciding to join the navy, the recruiter enthusiastically pumped Joe's hand.
(Was the recruiter deciding to join the navy? The only other option is "Joe's hand.")

Upon entering the doctor's office, a skeleton caught my attention.
(Was the skeleton entering the doctor's office? The only other option is "my attention.")

Any short descriptive phrase in a sentence conventionally modifies the closest noun in that sentence. Your writing will confuse the reader if that phrase is positioned unclearly--even if the right word does appear in the same sentence. This is "a misplaced modifier."

Examples of Confusing Misplaced Modifiers

She claimed yesterday she saw a UFO.

(Did she *see* the UFO yesterday? Or did she *make the claim* yesterday? To be clear, we must rewrite the sentence.)

The assembly line workers were told that they had been fired by the personnel director.

(Did the personnel director do the act of *telling* the workers they had been fired? Or was he the one who did the original act of *firing* them? It's not at all clear.)

Groucho Marx used this technique for many of his jokes:

"The other day, I shot an elephant in my pajamas. How he got in my pajamas, I'll never know."

Thus, if a phrase is describing, renaming, or elaborating upon a specific word, good writers do two things. (1) They place this modifier immediately beside the word it modifies. (2) They make sure the word being modified actually appears in the sentence! The most dangerous misplaced one-word modifiers are these examples: *almost*, *even*, *hardly*, *just*, *merely*, *nearly*, *only*, and *simply*. Usually present participles (*-ing* words that describe a noun) are the culprit in dangling modifiers.

Fix These Dangling and Misplaced Modifiers

1. I was late for the school bus again. Running for the bus, my book fell in the mud.
2. Deciding to join the navy, the recruiter enthusiastically pumped Joe's hand.
3. Upon entering the doctor's office, a skeleton caught my attention.
4. Explain the difference between these two uses of the modifier *nearly*. Which one indicates the speaker actually earned some money--say \$2999 dollars or so? Which one indicates he almost earned some money, but actually didn't earn any at all?

I nearly earned \$3,000.

I earned nearly \$3,000.

5. Explain the difference between these two uses of the modifier *only*. Which one conveys the ideas that lasers are devices limited to mere destruction, but might leave other harmful matter in the surrounding tissue intact? Which one indicates they are precise instruments that specifically target harmful tissue and thus leave beneficial surrounding tissue unharmed?

Lasers only destroy the target; they leave the surrounding cells intact.

Lasers destroy only the target; they leave the surrounding cells intact.

DANGLING MODIFIER DEMENTIA!

1. To please the neighbors, some fireworks were set off a day early.
2. Though only sixteen years old, the college accepted Martha's application.
3. Climbing up the ladder carefully, the frightened cat was brought down from the tree.
4. After a quick change into my hospital gown, the nurse told me to relax.
5. Before replacing any wall outlet, the electricity should be turned off.
6. To be cooked well, you must steam vegetables.
7. As a long sturdy rod, I know the Bassmaster 2000 is the best fishing pole available for fly-fishing.
8. I have many fond memories of my Aunt. While still a boy, my Aunt and I went to the Dallas Cup Rodeo. For something so rustic, the event was quite exciting.
9. Dentists provide many useful tips for your health. For instance, flossing your teeth daily, gum disease can be prevented.
10. Before engaging in strenuous aerobic exercise, warm-up activities are necessary.

MORE MISPLACED MODIFIER MADNESS!

(Be careful! Some of the following sentences may have nothing wrong with them!)

11. Having laid an egg weighing two pounds, the farmer proudly displayed his favorite ostrich before the photographers.

12. Stung by wasps, bees, or other such insects, powerful toxins can bring on allergic reactions so severe that people die. Being aware of the danger is the first step to prevent such a death.

13. The veterinarian never returned our frantic phone calls. Having given birth to six kittens, my girlfriend anxiously watched her exhausted cat, Whiskers. She lay on the floor panting for hours. I was uncertain if this behavior was normal.

14. Giving into my desires, I ran out and purchased eight bags of barbeque pork rinds. My wife was not amused.

15. Ugly, warty creatures with protruding noses and bat-like wings, architecture students find gargoyles endlessly fascinating as expressions of the grotesque.

16. There are many pictures of comedians who have performed at Gavin's on the walls. He is an unusual host noted for his decorations.

17. When following a strict diet high in protein and low in carbohydrates, weight loss programs can make a difference in the quality of life. Given that doctors acknowledge this fact, it is surprising more people do not try Dr. Adkins' diet plan.

18. The robber was described as a six foot-tall man with brown hair and eyes and a mustache weighing 150 pounds.

19. Disgusted with his own dangling modifiers, the teacher reviewed his handouts.

20. The time had come to leave at last. Deciding to pack up for college, my dog stared sadly at me as I bustled about the room.

21. Inhaling the fumes from paint thinner, statistics show that significant brain damage can occur.

22. After several years of inhaling fumes from paint thinner, brain damage is often one of the results.

23. After being bitten by seven dogs, the mailman decided to carry industrial strength tasers with him during his early morning deliveries.

24. Having applied a tourniquet, the bleeding finally stopped.
25. The policemen finally stopped the criminal using pepper spray and handcuffs.
26. David struck down Goliath fighting against a giant.
27. Treated with penicillin, a severe allergic reaction occurred. The patient died at 10:34 p.m.
28. With a cold, clear penetrating look, the poker game stopped cold as Slim Pickens lay down his cards.
29. Medical research offers the modern world many miracles. Using a small amount of infected nutrient, serums can be prepared to inoculate people against polio. Before making this discovery, scientists had no way to treat the disease.
30. Famous throughout the world for his shocking makeup, wailing lyrics, and androgynous wardrobe, the editor for the church newspaper chose to interview Marilyn Manson.
31. Circling the coldest regions of outer space in an endless dance, the astronomers watched the planet Pluto in awe.
32. Clutching a flensing knife and dreaming of a pâté made of human liver, the movie critic saw the familiar cannibal known as Hannibal Lector appear once more in the sequel. This madman first appeared in books by Thomas Harrison. Surprising to many fans, Anthony Hopkins was not the first actor to portray him.
33. Observing safe-sex practices or abstinence, the risk of contracting a disease like AIDS rapidly diminishes.
34. Because John knew only English, he could not read a menu that was offered to him by his waitress that was written in Spanish.
35. Thundering loudly over the waves and spraying millions of liters of water, I saw a huge tidal wave approaching the shore.
36. Having turned to the Dark Side, Yoda sadly watched his pupil Darth Vader become obsessed with power.