



# Center for Writing and Speaking

## S | NO. 07 IN THE CENTER FOR WRITING AND SPEAKING HANDOUT SERIES

### Misplaced Modifiers

A *modifier* is a word, phrase, or clause that provides additional information about another word. *Misplaced modifiers* occur when the modifier is improperly separated from the word it describes, causing the sentence's meaning to change.

#### Common Mistakes

The misplacement of modifiers can lead to nonsensical sentences.

- Example: "I smell the pasta *running down the stairs*."
  - In this sentence, "running down the stairs" should modify "I." Instead, it is placed after the word "pasta," therefore it is implying that the pasta is running down the stairs.
  - Correct: "*Running down the stairs*, I smell the pasta."
- Example: "She gave the doll to the girl *made of plastic*."
  - In this sentence, "made of plastic" should modify "doll," but its placement in the sentence implies that the girl is made of plastic.
  - Correct: "She gave the doll *made of plastic* to the girl."

#### The importance of properly placed modifiers

While readers would likely be able to decipher the meaning of the previous examples due to their absurdity, there are situations in which misplaced modifiers cause miscommunication.

- Example: "The woman said *on Friday* she would arrive."
  - In this sentence, it is unclear what "on Friday" is describing. It could be the day that the woman is arriving, or it could be the day during which the woman was talking about this. The modifier drastically changes the meaning of the sentence depending on where it's placed, because neither possibilities are illogical.
  - Correct: "The woman said she would arrive *on Friday*." or: "*On Friday*, the woman said she would arrive."

#### Dangling modifiers

Another thing to watch out for is dangling modifiers. This occurs when the modifying phrase does not match the subject of the sentence. These mistakes might be harder to spot.

- Example: "*After visiting the castle*, the mansion looked small in comparison."
  - Although the meaning is clear, the modifier "after visiting the castle" is left dangling without a subject. The following clause does not clarify who or what was visiting the castle.
  - Correct: "*After visiting the castle*, I thought the mansion looked small in comparison."
- Example: *After napping*, the lights turned on.
  - While it is clear the lights turned off after someone napped, it is unclear who turned on the lights since the modifier "after napping" is left dangling without a subject.
  - The sentence should be changed to "After napping, they turned on the lights."

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