Misplaced Modifiers

**DEFINITION:** Modifiers are words, phrases, or clauses that add detail or description to part of a sentence. A misplaced modifier occurs when the modifier is located too far away from the word it modifies and the sentence does not make sense.

The following sentences contain misplaced modifiers. The modifiers are underlined.

According to some sources, President Allan will announce his newest environmental initiatives and entertain foreign dignitaries **on deep sea drilling**.

Preferring to hire actors, the artwork was not performed by Ondak.

IDENTIFY AND CORRECT THE MISPLACED MODIFIERS BELOW.

1. Church steeples lurk in the background, occasionally obscured by fog in each composition.

2. Throughout the novel, Maribel tries to convince her ailing father that all cancer is not a death sentence.

3. Kinkade creates a closed world through use of repetitive imagery and scenery on his canvases.

HAVING TROUBLE? If you are having trouble identifying the misplaced modifiers, let’s break down the different types of modifiers.

**Understanding Modifiers**

As explained above, modifiers can be words, phrases, and clauses. All modifiers add additional information to another word or phrase in the sentence.

**ADJECTIVE AND ADVERBS:** Adjectives and adverbs such as *only, even, barely, often, almost, nearly, and just* are some of the most common modifiers. When using such words, be sure to place them as close as possible to the word that they modify. For example, only place a modifier in front of a verb if it is modifying that verb.

**EXAMPLE OF BAD MODIFIER:** Starved after his weeklong camping trip, David almost ate the entire buffet line.

**EXAMPLE OF GOOD MODIFIER:** Starved after his weeklong camping trip, David ate almost the entire buffet line.

**EXERCISE** – After years at his stressful law firm, Ralph knows that shopping for shoes often calms him.

**NOT:** When using the modifier, “not,” a sentence can easily be altered to mean something different than the author’s intent.
BAD: While her research argues that American celebrity culture negatively affects adolescent girls’ self-perceptions, she makes a point that all media is not bad for teenagers’ development.

GOOD: While her research argues that American celebrity culture negatively affects adolescent girls’ self-perceptions, she makes a point that not all media is bad for teenagers’ development.

EXERCISE – During the application process, Professor McMahon reminds herself that all students do not have professional interpersonal skills.

PHRASES AND CLAUSES: Misplaced phrases and clauses can be more difficult to spot because they can be more distant from the word they modify, but pay attention to that which the phrase refers and assess whether its placement makes sense.

EXAMPLE OF BAD PHRASE: Two cars were reported stolen by the Glencoe Police yesterday, an incident that illustrates the increase in crime in Chicago’s northern suburbs.

EXAMPLE OF A GOOD PHRASE: The Glencoe Police reported stolen cars yesterday, which illustrates the increase in crime in Chicago’s northern suburbs.

EXERCISE – Studying abroad prevents older students from joining the honor council, a popular activity for students during their junior and senior years.

Understanding Dangling Modifiers and Participles

A dangling modifier is a modifier that has no word in the sentence for it to modify. Consequently, this causes it to modify an unintended word. To correct, try to name the appropriate “doer” of the action in the sentence.

EXAMPLE OF DANGLE MODIFIER: To run effectively in this weather, you must drive your car daily.

EXAMPLE OF A GOOD MODIFIER: In order for your car to run effectively in this weather, you drive the car daily.

EXERCISE – Having required her students to schedule individual conferences with her, the afternoon seemed long and endless.

EXERCISE – Driving west, Mt. Rushmore remains a monument fraught with controversy.

EXERCISE – To succeed in the art industry, mentors and professional connections are vital.
EXERCISE: UNERLINE THE MODIFIERS IN EACH SENTENCE, IDENTIFY THE TYPE OF MODIFIER, AND ASSESS WHETHER OR NOT IT IS MISPLACED.

1. Cheng’s movie begins beautifully – the protagonist, Sandra, carefully drives down winding mountain roads and glances at a small deer on her way to work.

2. Convinced that Pierce’s theory is valid, the experiment was ended early by the university’s research team.

3. At the end of the film, Hernando searches for the locket that his father gave his mother, and when he finally finds it, he places it in Sandra’s hands without difficulty.

4. In the quiet courthouse, the prosecuting attorney set the scene: Sprinting on a warm summer afternoon, the car collided with the marathoner.

5. Though he fails to send his family birthday cards, Syed only has two siblings.

HAVING TROUBLE? Let’s take a closer look at phrases and clauses.

Understanding Clauses and Phrases

Phrases and clauses often function as modifiers. In order to understand

**DEFINITIONS:** A **clause** is a word group that contains a subject and a verb, but not all clauses can stand alone.

A **phrase** is a word group that lacks a subject, a verb, or both.

**EXERCISE:** ARE THE FOLLOWING CLAUSES OR PHRASES?

1. Sleepers in that quiet earth  
   A. Clause  
   B. Phrase

2. Despite the fact that she hates mice  
   A. Clause  
   B. Phrase

HAVING TROUBLE? Looking closer at different types of clauses and phrases will make it easier to determine how to combine them.

**Independent and Dependent Clauses**

**DEFINITION:** An **independent clause** contains a subject and a verb and can stand alone as a sentence.
EXAMPLE: Inez had a lovely wedding.

DEFINITION: A dependent clause contains a subject and a verb and begins with a subordinating conjunction (although, even though, whenever, before, once, since, etc.). Dependent clauses cannot stand alone and are not complete sentences.

EXAMPLE: Even though her flowers arrived late.

USE A COMMA TO JOIN A DEPENDENT AND AN INDEPENDENT CLAUSE TOGETHER TO MAKE A COMPLEX SENTENCE.

EXAMPLE: Even though her flowers arrived late, Inez had a lovely wedding.

****A COMMA IS REQUIRED WHEN JOINING A DEPENDENT CLAUSE TO AN INDEPENDENT CLAUSE.

Exploring Types of Phrases

Phrases often modify words, ideas, or clauses. To avoid misplaced modifiers, the phrase must be placed next to the word(s) that it modifies. To add a phrase in front of an independent clause, join the two word groups with a comma.

PREPOSITIONAL PHRASE: A phrase beginning with a preposition and ending with the noun the preposition modifies.

EXAMPLE: Throughout the winter, the family hoped that her prognosis would improve.

EXERCISE – Identify the prepositional phrase in the following sentences and identify what the prepositional phrases are modifying.

My favorite hiding place is behind the large oak tree.

Around the corner, Devin’s house looms large.

The guinea pig scurried under the bed.

PARTICIPIAL PHRASE: A present or past participle and its objects, complements, and modifiers.

EXAMPLE: Winded, the runners took one more lap around the track.

EXERCISE – Identify the participial phrase in the following sentences and identify what the participial phrases are modifying.

Dodging the tourists, Allison hated jogging in downtown Manhattan.

Washed with soap and water, the dishes shined.
Stirring slightly, the sleeping baby yawned.

**APPOSITIVE PHRASE:** A noun or noun phrase that renames a nearby noun or pronoun.

**EXAMPLE:** Artists at heart, news photographers tell stories in aesthetically pleasing ways.

**EXERCISE** – Identify the appositive phrase in the following sentences and identify what the appositive phrases are modifying.

1. The insect, a large cockroach, climbed out of the drain.
2. Bucky, Keisha’s nine-year-old cocker spaniel, still enjoys playing fetch.
3. A talented singer, Albert serenaded his elderly grandmother at her nursing home.

**HAVING TROUBLE?** In order to clearly understand how to join a phrase to an independent clause, you must be able to determine the clause’s subject.

**Locating a Sentence’s Subjects and Verbs**

Locating the subject and verb will allow you to determine whether a word group is a clause or a phrase.

**DEFINITION:** The subject of the sentence is the person, place, thing, or idea that is doing or being something.

**THE SUBJECTS IN THE FOLLOWING SENTENCES ARE UNDERLINED:**

My mother won the lottery.
After midnight, he falls asleep.
My favorite animal is the polar bear.

**UNDERLINE THE SUBJECTS IN THE FOLLOWING SENTENCES:**

Surprisingly, the Martians appeared friendly and cooperative.
The nurse practitioners attended the conferences and then met for dinner.
Worried about finding employment, Sarah wondered if she should admit that she had once committed a felony.
Smiling, Magdalena watched her boyfriend impersonate the celebrity.
Once upon a time, dinosaurs roamed the Earth.
Everyone at the law firm agreed to wear jeans, or at least casual pants, on Fridays.
Most of his friends have plans for after graduation.

After they crossed the finish line, the group of friends hugged each other and cheered.

Despite the light rain, the afternoon was beautiful.

I saw two cars drag racing at the intersection of Highway 14 and Kishwaukee Valley Road.

The view encompasses San Diego’s harbor and skyline; on clear days, a glance to the south reveals the Tijuana coastline.

Cabrillo’s journey began in what is now Acapulco, Mexico and ended far to the north at the Russian River in northern California.

Many Westerners are familiar with the Chinese New Year because of the 12-year cycle of animals in the Chinese zodiac.

DEFINITION: The verb describes the action or state of being taken by the subject.

THE VERBS THAT MODIFY THE SUBJECTS ARE BOLDED:
My mother won the lottery.
After midnight, he falls asleep.
My favorite animal is the polar bear.

CIRCLE THE VERBS IN THE FOLLOWING SENTENCES:

How does the protagonist garner sympathy from her classmates?

Sports are great activities.

She thinks about her ex-boyfriend too much.

According to Chinese mythology, the coming of the New Year coincides with the arrival of a monster that appears each year to eat whatever humans it can find.

Biking four miles does not sound appealing.

Nick hated eating at restaurants.

We usually exercise together every Monday night.

Why should students pay the consequences for legislators' irresponsible decisions?
While playing the clarinet, Moira sneezed.

Irritated, the professor asked her students to put away their cell phones.

The remaining puppies played together.

The New Year festival usually lasts two weeks, beginning on the first day of the first lunar month of the Chinese calendar and ending on the fifteenth day.

In the evening, pubs are also good places to hear local musicians in full session.

**PRACTICE:** Now that you understand how to relate a modifying word, phrase, or clause to another element in a sentence, correct the following misplaced and dangling modifiers.

1. History remembers her as the first woman to run for president of the United States in 1872.

2. Too proud to reconcile, the locket dropped to the floor, and Sandra left the room.

3. Professor Diaz recently presented a paper at a conference entitled, “Averting Bloodshed: The Benefits of Community-Based Mediation Services.”

4. On her way home, Jennifer found a gold man’s watch.

5. Unfortunately, that jacket was too small in the store.

6. The patient was referred to a dermatologist with several skin problems.

7. After watching the game, the bleachers were emptied.

8. I like Jennifer because she survives anything that life throws at her with confidence and style.

9. Starting out as a short-order cook, the work can be confusing at first.

10. Arriving home at midnight, the house was dark.