

## Misplaced and Dangling Modifiers

Modifiers, whether they are single words, phrases, or clauses, should point clearly to the words they modify and a sentence should flow from subject to verb to object, without lengthy detours along the way. When a long adverbial element separates a subject from its verb, a verb from its object, or a helping verb from its main verb, the result is usually awkward.

Split infinitives occur when a modifier appears between *to* and the verb, as in *to carefully balance*. It is best to place the modifier before or after the phrase it modifies, as in *to balance carefully*, unless the alternate phrasing sounds unnatural.

Dangling modifiers fail to refer logically to any word in the sentence. They are usually word groups that suggest but do not name an actor, as in this example:

*Opening the window to let out a huge bumblebee*, the car accidentally swerved into the wrong lane.

This is awkward because the car didn't open the window; the unnamed driver did. To fix a dangling modifier, either name the actor in the subject of the sentence or name the actor in the modifier.

Opening the window to let out a huge bumblebee, the driver of the car accidentally swerved into the wrong lane.

OR

As the driver opened the window to let out a huge bumblebee, the car accidentally swerved into the wrong lane.

### Causes and cures for misplaced and dangling modifiers

Cause You are trying to avoid using the word *I*, as in: *At the age of twenty, my father let me drive his restored Mustang.*

Cure Don't be afraid to use the word *I* in a personal narrative or in other writing that is clearly about you: *When I turned twenty, my father let me drive his restored Mustang.*

Cause You are writing in the passive voice, with the subject of your sentence receiving the action instead of doing it: *To finance the rescue effort, thousands of dollars were donated.*

Cure Write in the active voice unless you have a good reason for choosing the passive: *To finance the rescue effort, citizens donated thousands of dollars.*

Cause To achieve sentence variety, you are putting certain modifiers up front in a sentence—without noticing that they dangle.

Cure Keep the modifier up front for variety, but add an actor to it, or change the subject of the sentence so that it names the actor.

Cause You think your sentence is clear even though the modifier dangles.

Cure You may be right, but be aware that some readers—especially English professors—find dangling modifiers distracting.