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.

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