



IWU's WC|TS Presents:

## A Guide to (Mis)Using Modifiers

Modifiers can be a single word: an *angry* elephant; a phrase: Vernon chased *the furious, trumpeting elephant down the hill*; or a dependent clause: Vernon, *who was nearly fainting from fear and anxiety*, chased the furious, trumpeting elephant down the hill. Modifiers are used as additional words and phrases which provide context (or additional information) about another word in the sentence.

- Ex: She read the dusty, old novel.
  - The word novel is being described by the modifiers dusty and old.

### *How are modifiers used?*

- As adjectives (or words that provide additional information about nouns):
  - Her dusty, old book was engaging.
    - The terms “dusty” and “old” describe the noun (person, place, thing, idea) book.
- As adverbs (or words that provide additional context about verbs):
  - She lovingly flipped through its pages.
    - The term “lovingly” describes the action (verb) of how she flipped through the pages.
- As phrases (such as noun or prepositional phrases):
  - She finished reading it in her dorm room.
    - The prepositional phrase “in her dorm room” lets us know where the reading was done.
  - The book on women’s rights had kept her interest.
    - The phrase describing the book “book on women’s rights” lets us know more about the reading.

### *How are modifiers misused?*

- *Misplaced modifiers*: If modifiers don't clearly refer to the words they should modify, confusion ensues.
- *Missing modifiers*: if modifiers don't exist in the sentence, it can sometimes be hard to get complete information about the topic.

### Steps you can take to clarify your modifiers:

- 1) Placement in a sentence: position a modifier near the word it modifies.
  - CONFUSING: An elephant rumbled down the street, grey with dust.
    - Is the street grey with dust? Or is it the elephant? It's unclear.
  - CLEAR: A grey, dusty elephant rumbled down the street.
    - Now we know the elephant is the grey, dusty one—not the street.
- 2) References to nouns: make sure a modifier clearly refers to only one word.
  - CONFUSING: Sitting in the hot summer sun often accelerates the skin's aging process.
    - Does often refer to when one sits in the sun or to the aging process, or both?
  - CLEAR: Often, sitting in the sun accelerates the skin's aging process.

- Now we know that it relates specifically to the amount of time one spends in the sun, and not the aging process.
- 3) Position within clauses of a sentence: move modifiers that split sentences so that sentences aren't cut in two.
  - CONFUSING: The agent signed, with her client seated beside her, the contract.
    - The placement of her client's location is awkward here. It cuts up the sentence and distracts us from the main subject.
  - CLEAR: With her client seated beside her, the agent signed the contract.
    - Now, everyone's location is apparent and the sentence flows smoothly.
- 4) Clarify your dangling modifiers: make sure introductory phrases or clauses refer to a specific word. If the sentence is in passive voice, an introductory clause which refers to an invisible agent can be very confusing.
  - A dangling modifier is a word or phrase being used as a modifier that is not clearly connected to another word or phrase in the sentence.
    - CONFUSING: After appearing in Pretty Woman, it was clear Hollywood had a new star.
      - To whom does the introductory phrase “after appearing...” refer? It’s unclear who this new star is.
    - CLEAR: After appearing in Pretty Woman, Julia Roberts became Hollywood's new star.
      - Now we know that Julia Roberts is the person who is modified by this description.
- 5) A subset of dangling modifiers are your demonstrative pronouns. Therefore, make sure to specify your demonstrative pronouns; don’t leave floating demonstrative pronouns, let your readers know what ideas they’re demonstrating from previous sentences/ clauses (modifying).
  - CONFUSING: He wrote, “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” This quote shows us that fear exists. That is important.
    - What is important? The quote? The existence of fear? The acknowledgement of that existence? We are unclear on this fact.
  - CLEAR: He wrote, “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” This quote shows us that fear exists. That acknowledgement is important.
    - Now we know that FDR’s acknowledgement of fear is what “that” modifies from the previous sentence.

For more support on using modifiers correctly, consult the following:

- [English Grammar for Dummies](#)—while the title is off-putting, this text is available in eBook form through Ames and provides wonderful insight on the use of modifiers
- [The Oxford Dictionary of English Grammar](#)—a wonderful resource whenever you’re stuck by the terminology your professor is using or that you find in our handouts! This text is also available as an e-resource through the Ames Library.
- [English Made Easy](#) (2 volumes)—while this set of books is supposed to be for ELL/ESL students, it can and should be used by everyone looking for support with navigating the complexities of the English language and its grammar rules. Both volumes are available as eBooks at Ames Library.
- [Your writing center tutors](#)—we’re here to help you on what scholars deem “higher order concerns” (thesis statements, paper organization, use and analysis of evidence, etc.) but, time permitting, we’ll also cover grammatical structures and rules with you! Make an online or in-person appointment!