MODIFIERS: MISPLACED, SQUINTING AND DANGLING

THE ISSUE

The function of modifiers, adjectives and adverbs, is to enable you to express your ideas clearly and precisely by making some aspect of a statement more specific, to define it more precisely.

> The man **who just walked by** is my brother.
> (adjective)

> He walked **as if his feet hurt**.
> (adverb)

Obviously, if adverbs and adjectives are to do their jobs, they must be used correctly. Or, to turn the situation around, if readers of your prose have to work to figure out which segments of your statements you are trying to modify, you are not communicating very well with them.

THE RULES

- Adjectives automatically modify the noun, pronoun or phrase they are physically closest to. So, all other things being equal, you'll want to place your adjectives immediately before or after the word(s) they are intended to make more specific.

- Adverbs have more freedom to move around in sentences, but, again, you need to watch for points where they are ambiguous or clearly misplaced.

With these simple guidelines in mind, let's consider some typical problems.

TYPICAL PROBLEMS

MISPLACED MOFDIFIERS

Samples of misplaced modifiers periodically circulate through e-mail, purportedly examples of prose taken from police or insurance reports. In the following examples of misplaced modifiers, the adjective (in boldface) currently modifies the noun it is closest to (underlined). Fixing the problem, as you can see, requires getting it closer to the word it is actually intended to specify.

Misplaced	**Better**
A large painting attracts the visitor's <u>eye</u> **on the west wall.**	A large <u>painting</u> **on the west wall** attracts the visitor's eye.
We bought gas in Joseph at a small country <u>store</u> **that costs $4 a gallon**.	At a small country store in Joseph, we bought <u>gas</u> **that costs $4 a gallon**.
When fried, <u>I</u> like okra.	I like <u>okra</u> **when fried**.

SQUINTING MODIFIERS

Such modifiers are said "to squint" because they could modify one of two possible grammatical structures/ideas:

> Eating out **often** pacifies her.

What are you trying to say here?

> She is pacified by <u>eating out</u> two or three times a week (**often**).

> Eating out is a strategy that usually (**often)** <u>pacifies</u> her.

DANGLING MODIFIERS

Dangling modifiers are so called because they are modifiers (usually adjectives) that do not obviously and logically refer to a word or phrase in the sentence, or to a noun or pronoun in the form that it appears in the sentence.

> **Arriving home exhausted**, a beer and bed were the only things on his mind.

> **Having flunked two tests**, the best option was to drop the class.

> **Forced to leave the country**, exile was Marsha's fate for the next seven years.

> The evening was fun, **playing video games and listening to rap**.

Dangling modifiers are often found at the beginnings of sentences (as is the case of the first three examples above), and they are most often phrases that begin with verbals (true of all these examples). Since verbals have their roots in verbs, they lull language users into assuming they are functioning in these sentences as verbs, which is not the case.

<u>Verbals</u>:
seeing   (present participle)
seen   (past participle)
to see   (infinitive)

<u>Verbal phrases functioning as adjectives</u>:

    Seeing Sally, <u>John</u> ran to greet her.

    Seen at a distance, <u>Gerry</u> looks like Paul McCartney.

    To see the parade better, <u>the little boy</u> climbed onto his father's shoulders.

Each of the boldfaced phrases in these various sentences is functioning as an adjective. The adjectival function of these phrases becomes more obvious when they are placed after the noun they currently modify.

    <u>John,</u> **seeing Sally**, ran to greet her.

    <u>Gerry,</u> **seen at a distanc**e, looks like Paul McCartney.

    <u>The little boy</u>, **to see the parade better**, climbed onto his father's shoulders.

Using this same strategy of placing the adjectival phrase after the noun it modifies nicely points up the problem with dangling modifiers.

    A beer and bed, **arriving home exhausted**, were the only things on his mind.

    The best option, **having flunked two tests**, was to drop the class.

    Exile, **forced to leave the country**, was Marsha's fate for the next seven years.

    The evening, **playing video games and listening to rap,** was fun.

There are two possible ways to fix dangling modifiers:

(1) Revise the sentence so that the appropriate noun (or pronoun) is expressed in the sentence, and comes immediately after the opening phrase.

(2) Revise the phrase as a clause, turning the verbal into a finite verb with its own subject.

Dangling	Noun expressed	Phrase to clause
Arriving home exhausted, a beer and bed were the only things on his mind.	**Arriving home exhausted**, <u>Sam</u> could think only of a beer and bed.	**When Sam arrived home exhausted**, a beer and bed were the only things on his mind.
Having flunked two tests, the best option was to drop the class.	**Having flunked two tests**, <u>I</u> decided my best option was to drop the class.	**After I flunked two tests**, the best option was to drop the class.
Forced to leave the country, exile was Marsha's fate for the next seven years.	**Forced to leave the country,** <u>Marsha</u> lived in exile for the next seven years.	**After Marsha was forced to leave the country,** she spent the next seven years in exile.
The evening was fun, **playing video games and listening to rap**.	**Playing video games and listening to rap**, <u>we</u> had fun that evening.	The evening was fun; **we played video games and listened to rap**.

THE PLIGHT OF POOR "ONLY"

The problem

Only can function as an adjective or an adverb, depending on the word it is intended to restrict. These days it is commonplace to see *only* misused, typically restricting a verb when the writer obviously intends another word to be restricted:

> He **only** drank three beers.

As the sentence now stands, it tells us that he drank the beers rather than pouring them over the heads of his friends or putting them in the fridge. The writer obviously meant:

> He drank **only** three beers.

In other words, the writer wanted to restrict the adjective *three*.

Fixing the problem

Whenever you use the word *only*, BE SURE you put it IMMEDIATELY IN FRONT OF the word(s) you wish to limit (boldfaced in the following examples):

> Only **Peter and Paul** went to Spanish class yesterday.

> Sally only **threatened** to call the cops.

She did well on only **one part** of the text.

She left home with only **a backpack**.

P.S. What has just been said about *only* applies also to these limiting words: *just*, *even*, *hardly*, *nearly*, *merely*.

REVIEW

When you are copyediting and proofreading your papers:

- Look for misplaced, squinting, and ambiguous adjectives and adverbs.   Fix in such a way that it is immediately and obviously clear which words or phrases are being modified.
- Test adjectival phrases that start a sentence, and other verbal phrases, to be sure they aren't dangling or misplaced. Obviously, you'll need to fix any problems you find.
- Be sure *only* comes immediately in front of the word/phrase you want to restrict.