



DANGLING AND MISPLACED MODIFIERS

If you've had problems with dangling modifiers in your writing, here's a handout to help you eliminate them. First, a brief explanation about English word order: The basic sentence pattern of a language is called syntax; in English, the basic pattern looks like this:

Subject—Verb—Object

Mother—baked—a cake.

Jeff—passed—the test.

Samantha—finished—her essay.

These basic, easy-to-understand sentences follow the normal English word order. If you want to add modifiers (adjectives or adverbs) to a sentence, you'll normally place them in front of the word they modify:

Mother—carefully baked—a chocolate cake.

Jeff—barely passed—the chemistry test.

Samantha—finally finished—her 12-page history essay.

When you write sentences, you rarely have problems putting adverbs and adjectives where they belong because you're used to English word order. However, correctly putting verbal adjectives (participles) into your writing takes practice.

Verbal adjectives are made from a verb+an ending and show either present or past time. The present participle ends with -ing. The past participle usually ends with -ed or -en.

jumping/jumped

stealing/stolen

playing/played

talking/talked

studying/studied

breaking/broken

Remember that a verbal adjective—like any other adjective—comes as close as possible to the noun/pronoun it modifies. So when your comp instructor marks a dangling or misplaced modifier, it means the verbal adjective /phrase has nothing to modify or is too far away from the word it modifies. As a result, sentences with dangling or misplaced modifiers frequently sound odd or amusing:

*Covered with a cream sauce, my **husband** loves spinach soufflé.*

(Since we assume your husband isn't covered with sauce, move the participle closer to the word it really modifies--spinach soufflé.)

My husband loves ***spinach soufflé*** covered with a cream sauce.

*After cleaning my room, my **dog** wanted to take a walk.*

(We know your dog didn't clean your room, so rephrase the sentence to make clear who did the cleaning--I.)

*After cleaning my room, **I** took my dog for a walk.*

or

*After **I** cleaned my room, my dog wanted to take a walk.*

Using -ing and -ed participles enlivens your writing by making it more sophisticated. Try using them occasionally, but make sure the noun or pronoun doing the "action" of the participle is mentioned in your sentence:

*After cleaning my room, my **dog** wanted to take a walk.*

In this example, ask yourself "who" cleaned the room. The person who "cleaned" is not mentioned at all in the sentence. Notice how the two revised versions above add the word "I" somewhere. This way, the verbal adjective has a word to modify and no longer dangles.

Besides the verbal adjective "dangler," a misplaced modifier occurs when an adjective clause or phrase is too far from the word it modifies. Adjective clauses begin with words like *who*, *whom*, *which*, *that* and contain a subject and a verb. Adjective phrases begin with prepositions like *into*, *on*, *at*, *for*, *with*. In the sentence below, the adjective clause is italicized and the word it seems to modify is in bold italics:

We gave all the food to the **cat** *that was left over*.

(We're pretty certain your cat wasn't left over, so move the adjective clause close to the word it really modifies--food.)

We gave all the **food** *that was left over* to the cat.

Steve bought a rebuilt Mustang from a **salesman** *with a leaking radiator*.

(If the salesman didn't have a leaking radiator, move the adjective phrase close to the word it really modifies--Mustang.)

Steve bought a rebuilt **Mustang** *with a leaking radiator* from a salesman.

At the age of seven, my **mother** gave birth to my brother Rick.

(Here, prepositional phrases acting as adjectives tell the reader that your mother was seven years old when she gave birth a second time! Rephrase the sentence so that it makes sense.)

When **I** *was seven years old*, my mother gave birth to my brother Rick.

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