



Dangling and Misplaced Modifiers

A modifier is a word, phrase, or clause that describes something in a sentence. You need to word it correctly, or place it correctly (usually next to the word it modifies) to avoid confusion.

► A dangling modifier is one that does not name a specific actor; this leads the reader to assume that the modifying word or phrase refers to the subject of the sentence. Dangling modifiers can occur when a writer begins the sentence with a modifier that contains a participle (eating, published), or an infinitive (to be).

Confusing: While eating my lunch, a bee stung me.
Clear: While I was eating my lunch, a bee stung me.

The first sentence suggests that the bee not only stung me, it ate my lunch as well.

Confusing: Published in the paper, the man believed the story.
Clear: The man believed the story that was published in the paper.

The first sentence suggests that the man was published in the paper.

Confusing: To be a successful student, good study habits need to be developed.
Clear: If you want to be a successful student, you need to develop good study habits.

The first sentence suggests that good study habits themselves, if developed, can be a successful student.

► Misplaced modifiers are words, phrases, or clauses whose position in the sentence causes the reader to misinterpret the intended meaning.

Confusing: I have only eaten one egg in my entire life.
Clear: I have eaten only one egg in my entire life.

The first sentence suggests that all I have ever eaten is one egg. The second sentence suggests that I have eaten no more than one egg in my lifetime.

Confusing: The dog jumped the obstacle with its tail wagging.
Clear: The dog, with its tail wagging, jumped the obstacle.

The first sentence suggests that the obstacle has a wagging tail.

Confusing: She put the hat on her head that she bought in Toronto.
Clear: She put the hat, which she bought in Toronto, on her head.

The first sentence suggests that she bought her head in Toronto.

Practice Exercise

Rewrite the following sentences to eliminate dangling or misplaced modifiers. (Keep in mind that there is more than one correct way to re-write these sentences.)

1. The dog ate the food with the brown fur.
2. The woman driving the car wearing a bikini sped through town.
3. Opening the door, the fresh breeze tousled her hair.
4. If the hamster won't eat its food, feed it to the kitty.
5. All that glitters is not gold.
6. When completely empty, the technician should refill the beaker.
7. Adjusting his cowboy hat, the city slicker faced the cowboy.
8. Tightening his red tie, the microphone was approached by the announcer.
9. Walking along the street, the fallen leaves were kicked up by the little boy.
10. The book was on the table which she had read the day before.

Answers

1. The dog with the brown fur ate the food.
2. The woman, who was wearing a bikini, sped through town in her car.
3. The fresh breeze tousled her hair when she opened the door.
4. If the hamster won't eat its food, give the food to the kitty.
5. Not all that glitters is gold.
6. When the beaker is completely empty, the technician should refill it.
7. The city slicker faced the cowboy who was adjusting his cowboy hat.
8. The announcer tightened his red tie and approached the microphone.
9. The little boy kicked up fallen leaves as he walked along the street.
10. The book, which she had read the day before, was on the table.