



WRITING CENTRE

MISPLACED MODIFIERS

Modifiers are words, phrases, or clauses that add description to sentences. Typically, you will find a modifier snuggled right next to—either in front of or behind—the word it logically describes.

Sometimes a writer places the modifier too far away from the word it should describe. This creates a misplaced modifier.

- Raymond wore his one collared **shirt to the job interview, which was unfortunately stained with yellow mustard.**
- Professor Jones, **who was late with another essay,** waited for the slacker student.

To fix the error, locate the modifier next to the appropriate word:

- Raymond wore his one collared **shirt, which was unfortunately stained with yellow mustard,** to the job interview.
- Professor Jones waited for the slacker **student who was late with another essay.**

DANGLING MODIFIERS

A dangling modifier is a word or phrase that modifies a word not clearly stated in the sentence. A modifier describes, clarifies, or gives more detail about a concept.

Having finished the assignment, Jill turned on the TV.

“Having finished” states an action but does not name the doer of that action. In English sentences, the doer must be the subject of the independent clause that follows. In this sentence, it is Jill. She seems logically to be the one doing the action (“having finished”), and this sentence therefore does not have a dangling modifier.

The following sentence has an incorrect usage:

Having finished the assignment, the TV was turned on.

“Having finished” is a participle expressing action, but the doer is not the TV set (the subject of the independent clause): TV sets don’t finish assignments. Since the doer of the action expressed in the participle has not been clearly stated, the participial phrase is said to be a dangling modifier.

STRATEGIES FOR REVISING DANGLING MODIFIERS:

1. Name the appropriate or logical doer of the action as the subject of the main clause:

Having arrived late for practice, a written excuse was needed.

Who arrived late? This sentence says that the written excuse arrived late. To revise, decide who actually arrived late. The possible revision might look like this:

Having arrived late for practice, the team captain needed a written excuse.

The independent clause now names the person (the captain) who did the action in the modifying phrase (arrived late).

2. Change the phrase that dangles into a complete introductory clause by naming the doer of the action in that clause:

Without knowing his name, it was difficult to introduce him.

Who didn't know his name? This sentence says that "it" didn't know his name. To revise, decide who was trying to introduce him. The revision might look something like this:

Because Maria did not know his name, it was difficult to introduce him.

The phrase is now a complete introductory clause; it does not modify any other part of the sentence, so is not considered "dangling."

3. Combine the phrase and main clause into one:

To improve his results, the experiment was done again.

Who wanted to improve results? This sentence says that the experiment was trying to improve its own results. To revise, combine the phrase and the main clause into one sentence. The revision might look something like this:

He improved his results by doing the experiment again.