

AVOID MISPLACED MODIFIERS

Modifiers are intended to add meaning to words already in the sentence. When they send mixed messages, they do more harm than good. The English rule of placement requires that a modifier be near the word it enhances. In addition, the rule requires that the reader interpret the words according to their placement.

Limiting words, such as *only*, *just*, *almost*, *even*, *hardly*, *nearly*, *exactly*, *merely*, *scarcely*, *simply*, can change meaning according to where they are placed in the sentence. Consider the following:

Only he said he loved her.

He only said he loved he.

He said only he loved her.

He said he only loved her.

He said he loved only her.

He said he loved her only.

So decide what you mean before you arrange your sentence.

SQUINTING MODIFIERS:

Special kinds of misplaced modifiers are called "squinting" because the reader cannot be sure which word they modify.

WRONG: The dock that was constructed partially was destroyed.

RIGHT: The dock that was partially constructed was destroyed.

RIGHT: The partially constructed dock. . .

RIGHT: The dock that was constructed was partially destroyed.

Modifiers that are in the wrong place create very silly pictures for the literal reader. Correct them by placing them near the word they modify.

WRONG: The British Parliament passed a law forbidding Scots to wear kilts in 1746.

RIGHT: In 1746 the British Parliament passed a law. . .

WRONG: This was an attempt, of which the kilt was a symbol, to destroy Scottish nationalism.

RIGHT: This was an attempt to destroy Scottish nationalism, of which the kilt was a symbol.

DANGLING VERBALS:

A dangling verbal is another type of misplaced modifier; however, simply moving a "dangler" is not enough to repair the damage.

A verbal is a verb used as another part of speech. The verbal creates a picture of an action. If the verbal does not name an actor, English usage requires that the first noun following the verbal be interpreted as the doer of the action.

WRONG: Learning about bamboo, the plant amazed me.

RIGHT: Learning about bamboo, I was amazed at its uses.

RIGHT: When I learned about bamboo, I was amazed. . .

RIGHT: My learning about bamboo caused me great amazement.

WRONG: When measured, a Japanese scientist recorded four feet of growth in one bamboo plant twenty-four hours later.

RIGHT: When he measured the growth of one bamboo plant, a Japanese scientist recorded. . .