Understanding Misplaced & Dangling Modifiers

A modifier is a word, phrase, or sentence element that limits or qualifies the sense of another word, phrase, or element in the same sentence. In other words, modifiers modify, or change, what we know or understand about some other part of a sentence.

Typically, we place modifiers as close as we can to the word or element they modify. Frequently, modifiers also need to be arranged in logical, chronological order.

If we don’t put modifiers in their proper place, they can make a sentence very confusing, and sometimes they convey a meaning we never intended.

| Misplaced Modifiers | Modifiers need to go next to the word or words they modify. A modifier that isn’t near the word or words it modifies is called a “misplaced modifier.” Here’s an example:  
|                    | • *Give it to the girl at the desk with the long hair.* |
|                    | The sentence makes it sound like the desk has long hair. It probably doesn’t. 😊 |
|                    | Here’s the revised sentence:  
|                    | • *Give it to the long-haired girl sitting at the desk.* |
|                    | That makes a lot more sense! The phrase “*with the long hair*” modifies the word “*girl.*” |

| Dangling Modifiers | A modifier “dangles” if it doesn’t have anything to refer to. Most of the time, this is the result of writing sentences with no actor. An “actor” is the person in a sentence who performs an action. |
|                   | Here’s an example of a sentence with a dangling modifier:  
|                   | • *Trying to put out the fire, the fire extinguisher broke.* |
We know perfectly well that the fire extinguished can’t come down off the wall all by itself. A human has to operate it. Here’s what we really meant:

- *As I tried to put out the fire, the fire extinguisher broke.*

When we add a human actor, the sentence makes more sense, and the modifier has something to refer to, which makes it easier to understand.

| **Faulty Predication** | Dangling modifiers often cause another common problem called **faulty predication**. Faulty predication occurs when the predicate (everything in the sentence, including the verb, except the subject) indicates an action the noun can’t possibly perform.

Faulty predication is a very common problem in writing. Almost everyone writes a sentence with faulty predication at some time or another.

Here’s an example of faulty predication:

- *Call the office.*

You can’t call the office because it’s brick and mortar. It can’t answer the phone. You can, however, call the office *staff*. They can answer the phone, maybe even on the first or second ring. 😊 |