

Putting Modifiers in Their Proper Place

Act One: Misplaced Modifiers

By Debbie Santos Goncalves

Have you ever felt lost or confused? A sense of not being where you're supposed to be? Misplaced? Not a good feeling, right? Yet, as writers, we sometimes do this to our poor modifiers. The English language is confusing enough without us mucking it up even more. Let's learn to put those darn modifiers in their place and escape the confusion.

Misplaced Modifiers

A misplaced modifier is a word, phrase, or clause that is not directly before or immediately following the word it modifies or describes, but, instead, is incorrectly placed somewhere else in the sentence. This can cause the sentence to sound weird, awkward, confusing, and even illogical.

Here are two examples of misplaced modifiers that cause confusion.

- 1) The analyst said on Tuesday he would turn in the report.
 - Did the analyst say this on Tuesday? That's how it's written.
 - Or did the analyst mean to say he would turn in the report on Tuesday? If that's what he meant to say, then it should be written with the modifier (on Tuesday) immediately **following** what it is modifying (report).

Correction:

The analyst said he would turn in the report on Tuesday.

- 2) John said in January he would return to work.
 - Did John say this in January? That's how it's written.
 - Or did he mean to say he would return to work in January?

Correction:

John said he would return to work in January.

- 3) The fancy woman's hat blew away with the wind.
 - Is the woman fancy? That's how it's written.
 - Or is the hat fancy? In this case, the modifier (fancy) is an adjective describing the hat. It should be written with the modifier directly **in front** of the word it's modifying.

Correction:

The woman's fancy hat blew away with the wind.

- 4) They each ate a hot bowl of soup for dinner.
 - In this sentence, the bowl is hot, but we don't know if the soup is hot or not. Chances are the author is trying to describe the soup, not the bowl.

Correction:

They each ate a bowl of hot soup for dinner

Here are some examples of misplaced modifiers that are logically senseless.

- 1) We gave the old toys to the neighbor's kids that had been stored in the attic for years.
 - Meaning the neighbor's kids had been stored in the attic for years. I wonder if the neighbor has been looking for them. 😊
 - The modifier (that had been stored in the attic for years) should be immediately following what it is modifying (toys).

Correction:

We gave the old toys that had been stored in the attic for years to the neighbor's kids.

- 2) We found a box of books in the garage that Wendy had given to John.
 - How nice of Wendy to give John a garage.

Correction:

We found a box of books Wendy had given John in the garage.

- 3) Susy got a book at the store that contained pictures of modern architecture.
 - Meaning the store contained pictures of modern architecture. I wonder if they were hanging on the walls.

Correction:

Susy got a book that contained pictures of modern architecture at the store.

- 4) The kids ate snacks at the party that had no nutritional value.
 - A party with no nutritional value. Well, you know what they say, fun isn't always healthy.
 - Or maybe it was the snacks that had no nutritional value.

Correction:

The kids ate snacks with no nutritional value at the party.

Modifiers have a relationship with the word or phrase they modify, which is why they need to stick together. Let's not be the cause of their breakup. Instead, let's embrace our modifiers by putting them in their proper place so that they can convey our intentions correctly. Think of them as one-half of a two-couple relationship. When you see a romantic couple strolling hand-in-hand through the park, there's no one else walking between them. And there shouldn't be any other words between the modifier and the word or phrase it's modifying.