Identifying Modifier Errors

A "modifier" is a word or phrase that describes or elaborates on another idea within a sentence. Whenever modifiers are placed problematically in a sentence, they can confuse readers because it becomes unclear exactly what those modifiers are describing.

Misplaced modifiers, as the name suggests, are not placed closely enough to the word(s) they modify; in fact, they often seem to modify something else.

Problem: It was not a good idea to serve food to the guests standing around the room on flimsy paper plates.

It sounds like the guests are standing on paper plates!

Correction: It was not a good idea to serve food on flimsy paper plates to the guests standing around the room.

Dangling modifiers appear in a sentence that contains no word or phrase to which the modifier can be reasonably linked. These phrases often appear at the beginning of a sentence.

Problem: Driving up to the mountains for the weekend, the road was covered in a thick layer of ice.

"The road" is the subject of the sentence, so it sounds like the road was driving up the mountains for the weekend.

Correction: Driving up to the mountains for the weekend, we discovered that the road was covered in a thick layer of ice.

Disruptive modifiers impede the clarity and flow of a sentence by interrupting closely connected elements, such as the subject and verb or the verb and object. These disruptions make it difficult to follow the main idea of the sentence.

Problem: The researcher, who had never worked with chimpanzees before, was surprised, since he did not know how intelligent they can be, when they purposely undermined the experiment he was trying to conduct.

Correction: Because he had never worked with chimpanzees before and was unaware of how intelligent they can be, the researcher was surprised when the chimps purposely undermined the experiment he was trying to conduct.

Squinting modifiers can refer to either the word before it or the word after it, often with two very different potential meanings. Squinting modifiers are typically adverbs.

Problem: Visiting the Writing Center often improves the clarity of your writing.

Is this saying that you must visit the Writing Center often in order to improve, or is it saying that a single visit to the Writing Center often improves your writing?

Problematic modifiers can cause awkward and unclear sentences. To identify and correct problematic modifiers, try some of the suggestions below:

- ✓ Pay attention to the modifier's location. What is the modifier supposed to describe? Is it next to the word it's modifying? Is it breaking up other important parts of the sentence?

- ✓ Check modifiers at the end of sentences. Sometimes ideas occur to writers mid-sentence that don't always mesh neatly with the rest of the sentence.

- ✓ Keep an eye out for "limiting" modifiers (like *only, almost, hardly, just, scarcely, merely, simply, exactly,* and *even*). These modifiers can describe either the word before or the word after them, so the meaning of a sentence can be interpreted differently and can change dramatically depending on where in the sentence you put them.

- ✓ Watch out for modifying phrases that begin with *who, which, that, when, although, because,* and *while*. These phrases should be placed as close as possible to the word they modify.

- ✓ Look for *-ing* words. Many dangling modifiers are caused by *-ing* words that are used to modify other ideas in the sentence. Whenever you use an *-ing* word in this way, you must make sure that the doer of the *-ing* word is specified as close by as possible. For example: the following sentence doesn't make sense: **Jumping into the water to save the drowning swimmer, the crowd cheered the lifeguard.** This sounds as though *the crowd* jumped into the water while also cheering at the lifeguard, who is not doing anything. To correct this sentence, you would need to put "lifeguard" closer to "jumping": **Jumping into the water to save the drowning swimmer, the lifeguard was cheered by the crowd.**