Misplaced Modifiers

This section will help you:
- understand how words can be ordered for clear meaning
- grasp the important idea of "modification" in writing
- recognize the disorderly arrangement of words in a sentence
- repair arrangement errors to convey clear meaning

Review of Orderly Sentences

Notice that some words in a sentence may describe or give information about another word in that sentence.

In this sentence, “standing on tiptoe” gives us information about Ann.

Standing on tiptoe, Ann saw the pigs.

A word or group of words that describes or gives information about another group of words in the sentence is called a modifier. We say that a modifier alters another word or group of words in the sentence.

In orderly sentences, the parts of each sentence are arranged to convey a clear and logical meaning. Modifiers are placed as close as possible to the words they modify.

Sentences lose their orderly arrangement when the modifiers are too far apart from the words modified. Misplaced modifiers can cause confusion or misunderstanding.

Ann saw the pigs standing on tiptoe.

Are the pigs standing on tiptoe, or is Ann standing on tiptoe? The placement of a modifier affects the meaning of a sentence, sometimes in a silly way.

Another example of how the arrangement of words affects meaning.

The jockey rode the horse in red silks.

Is the horse wearing red silks, or is the jockey wearing red silks? Misplaced modifiers often create odd or confusing meanings.

In both of the correct sentences below, “red silks” stands near “jockey” and away from “horse.” By using this arrangement, the intended meaning is clear.

The jockey in red silks rode the horse.

Or

Wearing red silks, the jockey rode the horse.

More examples:

Any pizza pleases Toni sprinkled with garlic. (incorrect)
Any pizza, sprinkled with garlic, pleases Toni. (correct)

We found the love letter in the trash can, still smelling of perfume. (incorrect)
We found the love letter, still smelling of perfume, in the trash can. (correct)

To repair disorderly sentences containing misplaced modifiers, you may often have to reword portions of the sentence. For example, how would you repair the modification error in this sentence?

Staying inside, the warm fire kept Kim toasty. (incorrect)

Staying inside, Kim felt toasty beside the warm fire. (correct)

One of the most common modification errors occurs when modifiers at the beginning of the sentence (like “staying inside”) do not modify a nearby word.
Guard against this common error in your own writing by making sure that modifiers at the beginning of sentences are closely followed by the words they modify.

*Having grown up on a farm*, the city seemed noisy and dirty to the *twins.* (incorrect)

Because the modifier does not stand near the word it modifies, the meaning of the sentence is unclear.

*Having grown up on a farm*, the *twins* found the city noisy and dirty. (correct)

Words like *often, only, always,* and *almost* must be placed carefully in the sentence to avoid double meanings.

Notice the two possible meanings produced by the placement of “often” in this sentence.

Kay made a promise *often* to visit her relatives.

Does Kay make her promises often or does she visit often?

Kay made a promise to visit her relatives *often,* (She visits often.)

Kay *often* made a promise to visit her relatives. (She promises often.)

**Key Points to Remember:**

- Place modifiers as close as possible to the words they modify.
- Make sure that the intended meaning of the sentence is clear and that an unintended interpretation is not possible.
- Watch the placement of words like *almost, often, only,* and *always* to avoid double meanings.