

The Misplaced Modifier

Recognize a *misplaced modifier* when you see one.

Modifiers are words, phrases, or clauses that add description to sentences. Typically, you will find a modifier snuggled right next to—either in front of or behind—the word it logically describes. Take the simple, one-word adjective **blue**. If we add it to the sentence that follows, where should it go?

At a downtown dealership, Kara bought a truck from a salesman with a comb over.

Should we locate **blue** next to **dealership**? A **blue** downtown **dealership**? A **blue** Kara? A **blue** **salesman**? Of course not! Logic dictates that **blue** can describe only one word, **truck**, so we must place the modifier next to that word:

At a downtown dealership, Kara bought a **blue truck** from a salesman with a comb over.

In a similar manner, multi-word phrases and clauses often go right next to the word they describe. Here are some examples:

Gazing out the window, Paul missed the homework assignment that Prof. Zuromski wrote on the board.

Gazing out the window is a participle phrase describing **Paul**, the noun that follows.

Sam gobbled the sandwich, which was soggy with tomato juice, as he rushed to class.

Which was soggy with tomato juice is an adjective clause describing **sandwich**, the noun before it.

As the hurricane approached, we watched the tree branches waving in the strong breeze.

Waving in the strong breeze is a participle phrase describing **branches**, the noun in front.

Sometimes a writer places the modifier too far away from the word it should describe. Born in the confusion is a misplaced modifier, an error. Read these examples:

Churning in the Atlantic Ocean, we anxiously watched the weather report for information about the hurricane.

Churning in the Atlantic Ocean is a participle phrase. In the current sentence, it is describing the pronoun **we**. How illogical! **We** cannot churn in an ocean!

Raymond wore his one collared shirt to the job interview, which was unfortunately stained with yellow mustard.

Which was unfortunately stained with yellow mustard is an adjective clause. In the sentence above, it is describing **interview**, the noun in front. But an interview can't get stained with mustard!

Professor Jones, who was late with another essay, waited for the slacker student.

Who was late with another essay is an adjective clause. In this sentence, it is describing **Professor Jones**, the noun before it. But he's not the identified slacker! The student is!

To fix the error, locate the modifier next to the appropriate word:

We anxiously watched the weather report for information about the ***hurricane churning in the Atlantic Ocean***.

Raymond wore his one collared ***shirt, which was unfortunately stained with yellow mustard***, to the job interview.

Professor Jones waited for the slacker ***student who was late with another essay***.



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