

RULE

Modifiers should be placed as near as possible to the words they modify in order to keep the meaning clear.

WRITE

Start with each of the following “plain” sentences and revise them, using various modifiers as indicated.

Example:

Birds were singing.

1. Use two or more single adjectives.

Small yellow birds were singing

2. Use an adverb.

Birds were singing loudly.

3. Use a prepositional adjective phrase.

Birds with crested heads were singing.

4. Use prepositional adjective and adverb phrases.

Birds with crested heads were singing in the trees.

5. Use an adjective clause.

The birds that he kept in his house were singing.

6. Use an adjective and an adverb clause.

The birds that he kept in his house were singing as night fell.

7. Combine as many as you can; make sure your sentence makes sense.

The small yellow birds with crested heads were singing loudly as night fell.

(a) People will arrive.

(b) Students pass their courses.

(c) The idea should work.

(d) The Writing Centre helps students.

Those darned participles!

A particularly tricky type of modifier is called a participle. Participles act like adjectives.

Participles are actually part verb/part modifier; in other words, they are formed from verbs. Past participles are *regular* for many verbs (e.g. looked, glanced, closed); some are *irregular* (e.g. seen, flown, written). Present participles always end in *-ing*.

Complete the missing parts of the following table:

Verb	Past (or Passive) Participle	Present (or Active Participle)
fly		
see	seen	seeing
	taught	
		ringing
	divided	
swim		
		freezing
	moved	
hit		
		organizing
		learning
steal		
	caught	
ski		
give		
		writing
arise		
cut		
		broadcasting

When participles act as modifiers, they work like adjectives.

Identify which word is being modified by the participles in these sentences.

1. *Educated* people always eat their vegetables.
2. A *blinding* flash startled everyone on the merry-go-round.
3. The Millennium Scholarship Foundation is an independent organization *created* by an act of Parliament in 1998.
4. Most reptiles like to spend their time *basking* under a warm source of light.
5. *Clowning* around in the halls, the students somehow managed to tip over the entire vegetable cart.

OK—now do it the hard way: Identify the participle **and** indicate what it modifies.

1. Seeing the mouse on the floor, Tara jumped onto a chair.
2. Fried chicken is my favourite animal.
3. A dripping hot water tap is a big waste of money.
4. For breakfast, Fred had stewed prunes and shredded wheat.
5. A watched pot gathers no moss.
6. A small gnome, wearing a leather vest, blue trousers, and red pointed shoes, came to my door selling love potions.
7. I'm certain that they won't work, but the idea is fetching.
8. Lined up along the telephone wires, hundreds of blackbirds filled the air with their singing.
9. A certain elegance, hovering over the garden, wraps every blossom in a tender golden glow.
10. Seven striped skunks sat skulking on the sill.

Now it's your turn: The modifiers have been provided for you below; your task is to compose the rest of the sentence. Make sure the modifiers are placed close to the word(s) they modify.

1. After flying.....
2.seeing....
3. Filled with.....
4.squashed by.....
5. Leaving.....
6.shocked and appalled.

What is a dangler?

Occasionally a participle shows up in the wrong place in a sentence, or it appears without anything to modify. As a result, the meaning of the entire sentence becomes skewed as in the following examples:

- ⊗ *Lined up* along the telephone wires, we saw hundreds of blackbirds. (*lined up* appears to modify *we*)
- ☺ We saw hundreds of blackbirds *lined up* along the telephone wires.
- ⊗ By *proofreading* your assignments, your marks will improve. (Who's doing the *proofreading*? Not the assignments; not the marks)
- ⊗ By *proofreading* your assignments, it will improve your marks. (*Proofreading* appears to modify *it*; *it* is a vague pronoun with no antecedent.)
- ☺ By *proofreading* your assignments, *you* will improve your marks.

- ⊗ After *hunting* for days, the ring was finally found. (The *ring* is apparently doing the *hunting*)
- ☺ After *hunting* for days, Romeo finally found the ring.

NOTE: Dangling modifier errors seem to occur most often when a sentence begins with the participle: *By leaving....After finishing....By studying...When completing...* Keep a close eye on sentences that you begin this way.

Modifiers other than participles can turn up in the wrong place in your sentence. These may result in (unintended) humorous word pictures.

Examples

- ⊗ Please ask customers to smoke outside *politely*. (misplaced *adverb*)
- ⊗ Please point out the No Smoking signs if you see a customer smoking *in a polite way*. (misplaced *adverb phrase*)
- ☺ Please point out the No Smoking signs politely if you see a customer smoking.

- ⊗ FOR SALE: Four kitchen chairs by a furniture salesman *with some legs missing*. (misplaced *adjective phrase*)

- ⊗ *As a new graduate*, his grandmother gave him an heirloom fountain pen. (misplaced *prepositional phrase*: Is the grandmother the new graduate?)
- ☺ Benji's grandmother gave him an heirloom fountain pen when he was a new graduate.

- ⊗ Being the manager, *it* was important for the schedules to be up to date. (misplaced participle. This is a common error in which the pronoun *it* has no antecedent.)
- ☺ Being the manager, Jacob had to make sure the schedules were up to date.
- ☺ Since Jacob was the manager, he had to make sure the schedules were up to date.

The following words are modifiers that are commonly misplaced:

only	Almost	even	hardly
just	Merely	nearly	simply

Place them with the word or expression they modify.

- ⊗ I only need to read the first four chapters. (*Only* modifies *need*)
- ⊗ I need to only read the first four chapters. (*Only* modifies *read*)
- ☺ I need to read only the first four chapters. (*Only* modifies *the first four chapters*)

Notice the slight difference in meaning depending on the placement of the modifier in these sentences:

We *almost finished* the race at three o'clock. (We were near the end of the race at three.)
We finished the race at *almost* three o'clock. (We were at the end just before three.)

Only Jock dreams of meeting a pleasant, friendly girl. (*No one else has this dream.*)
Jock *only dreams* of meeting a pleasant, friendly girl. (*He dreams about it, but doesn't do anything about it.*)
Jock dreams *only of meeting* only a pleasant, friendly girl. (*It's the only dream he ever has.*)
Jock dreams of meeting *only a pleasant, friendly girl*. (*He dreams of meeting this one person.*)

Check your own writing!

1. If you have lost marks for misplaced modifiers, find the error and determine how it occurred. Rewrite the sentence(s) correctly.
2. Proofread your paragraph or essay focusing specifically on modifiers to make sure they have been used correctly.

SIDEBAR

Be careful with words ending in *ing*. They are tricky.

They can be nouns:

Swimming is good exercise.

I love *growing* roses.

They can be modifiers (present participles):

Swimming in the canal, Jorge lost his way.

I think I saw your brother *running* for a bus.

They can be verbs, BUT they will always be used with a helping verb:

Joe *was fixing* his car all day.

It seems like I'm always *running* out of time.

1. Read through one of your assignments looking for words that end in –ing. Identify each one as a participle, a noun, or part of a verb.
2. Identify past and present participles in your writing; for each one, identify the word that it modifies.
3. Read through your assignment, looking for the following modifiers: *only, almost, even, hardly, just, merely, nearly, simply*. If you find any, make sure each one appears with the word or phrase that it modifies.