

# FINDING AND FIXING DANGLING OR MISPLACED MODIFIER ERRORS

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## What's a Dangling or Misplaced Modifier Error?

Modifiers are words or a series of words that describe other words: something, someone, or an action. Modifiers should be placed close to what they describe or modify to avoid confusing readers about what is being modified.

**Simple Modifier + Noun** = A large truck.

**Complex Modifier** = Careening down the hill, the driver tried to stop the large truck.

A **Dangling or Misplaced Modifier Error** occurs when a modifier or series of modifiers are:

1. Placed too far away from the noun being described, which causes confusion about who or what is being modified, **or**
2. There is nothing in the sentence that can actually be modified.

## Example of a Dangling Modifier Error

**Error:** Walking to school today, a house burst into flames.

This sentence suggests that the house was walking to school today, but was it possible for the house to be walking to school today? Of course not! Someone who was walking to school saw the house burst into flames, but no person is mentioned in the sentence. Therefore, this modifier is called **dangling** because there is actually nothing in this sentence it can modify.

**Correction:** Walking to school today, I saw a house burst into flames.

We made the subject of the sentence the doer of the action in the modifier. Who was walking? I was walking, so adding the subject "I" and the verb "saw" corrects the sentence.

### TIPBOX

Beginning a sentence with an introductory phrase can often lead to a dangling modifier error. You can fix this error by placing modifiers closer to the nouns they modify.

## Examples of Misplaced Modifier Errors

**Error:** I saw a house on fire walking to school today.

*Walking to school* modifies *I*, but its placement suggests that it modifies the *house* instead. In other words, it sounds as if the *house on fire* was walking to school. Therefore, this modifier is **misplaced**.

**Correction:** While walking to school today, I saw a house on fire.

**Error:** My instructor told me yesterday I missed a quiz.

The modifier yesterday could be modifying the verb told in order to indicate when the instructor conveyed the information, or yesterday could be modifying missed to indicate when the speaker missed the exam.

**Correction Option #1:** Yesterday, my instructor told me I missed a quiz.

In this correction, we clarify that the instructor told the student yesterday that they had missed a quiz.

**Correction Option #2:** My instructor told me I missed a quiz yesterday.

In this correction, we clarify that the instructor told the student they missed a quiz that happened yesterday.

**Error:** People who exercise often can increase their energy levels.

The confusion is caused by two possible meanings: Do the people work out often or do they often have more energy if they work out? Does often modify exercise or increase?

**Correction Option #1:** People who often exercise can increase their energy level.

In this correction, we clarify that “often” was modifying the verb exercise, indicating that how often people work out can affect their energy levels.

**Correction Option #2:** People who exercise can often increase their energy level.

In this correction, we clarify that “often” was modifying the verb increase, indicating that people can often increase their energy levels by exercising.

#### TIPBOX

Pay special attention to where you place modifiers such as:

**Often, simply, hardly, barely, almost, only, nearly, merely, frequently**

These modifiers should be placed next to the words they modify in order to avoid confusion. Consider the difference between saying:

She <b>often</b> told me she loved me.	<b>OR</b>	She told me she <b>often</b> loved me.
The exam took <b>almost</b> three hours.	<b>OR</b>	The exam <b>almost</b> took three hours.
I went to college for <b>nearly</b> 8 years.	<b>OR</b>	I <b>nearly</b> went to college for 8 years.
I eat chocolate ice cream <b>only</b> .	<b>OR</b>	I <b>only</b> eat chocolate ice cream.

## Sentence Practice

Please identify and correct the modifier errors below:

1. While driving to the stadium, mass transit seemed like a better idea.
2. People who have to drive in rush hour traffic frequently like to talk on their cell phones.
3. Learning to drive, my car always overheated in traffic jams.
4. It took almost an hour to cool down enough to restart each time.
5. I was nearly late to math class every day, and it showed in my low grades.
6. Approaching the airport, my long trip was over.
7. Flying for nine hours, my legs were stiff and sore.

## For More Practice

The Online Writing Lab (OWL) at Purdue University has several resources—try them out!

- [Dangling Modifiers and How to Correct Them](#)  
(click the link above or go to [owl.purdue.edu/owl](http://owl.purdue.edu/owl), click on **General Writing**, then **Mechanics**, then select **Dangling Modifiers and How to Correct Them**)
- [Sentence Clarity \(Presentation\)](#)  
(This is designed as a presentation instructors can give in class, but you can use it to see more examples of misplaced modifiers, too. Click the link above or go to [owl.purdue.edu/owl](http://owl.purdue.edu/owl), click on **General Writing**, then **Mechanics**, then select **Sentence Clarity Presentation**)