

Modifier Placement

Adjective and adverbs are always modifiers, which are words or phrases used to tell something about another word or phrase in the sentence. The adjectives and adverbs in italics below modify the underlined words in the following sentences:

I want the *blue* necklace for my birthday.
He *barely* passed the test.
Your home is *very beautiful*.
She *nervously* tapped her *long* fingers.

As discussed in Chapter Three, modifiers can be phrases and clauses, too:

Matt drove the go-cart *that wouldn't go over ten miles an hour*.
Unable to control her temper, the customer threw down her purse and demanded a refund.
My uncle, *who once played on the professional tour*, gives golf lessons on the weekend.
It is important to take a calcium supplement, *which helps prevent osteoporosis*.

All of the modifiers above are adjective phrases; they each modify a noun or a pronoun. Similarly, adverb phrases often modify verbs:

Lynne made hamburgers *while I sliced vegetables*.
In the movie, the actor plays an innocent banker accused of stealing.
You must finish your dinner *before you are allowed to go outside*.
Because she was her grandmother's favorite grandchild, Mardy received most of the estate.

Modifiers, both as individual words and as phrases, are like leeches. They have the bad habit of attaching themselves to any words with which they come in contact, and some writers have the bad habit of putting modifiers next to the wrong word, creating a misplaced modifier. Look at the following example:

He *nearly* fell ten feet.

Nearly, an adverb, is the modifier in this sentence. It is in the correct location if the sentence means:

He almost fell but he didn't but it would have been a ten foot fall if he did.

In the original sentence, *nearly* is placed next to *fell*, so it has leeches on to modify that word. In this position in the sentence, it can only mean *almost fell*.

But what if the modifier changed positions and leeches onto the adjective *ten feet*?

He fell *nearly ten feet*.

Now the sentence has a completely different meaning:

He did fall, and he fell almost ten feet before hitting the ground.

GMAC may test you on a single misplaced adjective or adverb, especially with *barely*, *nearly*, *only*, and *just* because they often leech on to the wrong word. A single-word misplaced modifier such as these will likely occur in a sentence containing a more blatant grammatical error. However, the most common modifier error occurs when a phrase or clause is misplaced in a sentence:

Short on money, the action figure was the best present Marsha could find.
[Incorrect]

In this sentence, most readers will deduce that Marsha is short on money. However, because of the placement of the modifying phrase next to the wrong noun, the sentence is seriously flawed. As it reads now, the action figure was short on money (as if little GI Joes were out shopping at the mall). To correct these types of sentences, rearrange them and/or add words to convey the true meaning:

Short on money, Marsha felt that the action figure was the best present she could find. [Correct]

Or:

The action figure was the best present Marsha could find based on the money she had left. [Correct]

When an introductory phrase or clause is a modifier, the word immediately after the phrase or clause must be the referent:

Preparing for the picnic, Mom made potato salad.
Scavengers of the ocean, blue crabs will feast on most anything on the sea floor.
Seldom found outside of Germany, the Biewer is a rare breed of toy dog.
A teacher and an astronaut, Christa McAuliffe held the hopes of millions of children.

Many questions in *The Official Guide to GMAT Review* have a misplaced modifier in the introductory clause of the sentence. Look at another:

Produced in London, Alfred Hitchcock directed his first film, *The Pleasure Garden*, for Gainsborough Pictures. [Incorrect]

While it is true that Hitchcock was born in London, the sentence currently reads that Hitchcock himself was produced in London. The sentence is attempting to convey that the film was produced in London. Rearrange the sentence:

The Pleasure Garden, Alfred Hitchcock's first film, was produced in London for Gainsborough Pictures. [Correct]

Note that we have completely changed the modifier; *Alfred Hitchcock's first film* now modifies the title of the film, *The Pleasure Garden*.

A similar problem is the **dangling modifier**. A dangling modifier, which usually occurs in the introductory phrase or clause, doesn't seem to have a logical connection to any word or phrase in the sentence:

Misplaced and dangling modifiers create absurd sentences when read literally.

Driving to Florida, the dog needed to stop often. [Incorrect]

In this sentence, the dog is driving to Florida. The last time we checked, a dog license did not give canines the right to drive. Who was driving to Florida? The answer is obviously people, but the noun or pronoun that is meant to be modified is completely missing from the sentence and must be added:

Driving to Florida, we needed to stop often because of the dog. [Correct]

Try a more difficult version:

Using the Fujita Scale, a tornado's intensity can be rated on a scale of zero to six in order to predict possible damage and warn people in its path. [Incorrect]

Who is using the Fujita Scale? The way the sentence stands now, the *intensity* is using the scale. The proper referent, be it *scientists* or *researchers* or *stormchasers*, is not identified, thus creating a dangling modifier. To correct the sentence, add the noun being modified:

Using the Fujita Scale, scientists can rate a tornado's intensity on a scale of zero to six in order to predict possible damage and warn people in its path. [Correct]

Misplaced modifiers often occur with relative clauses, which are clauses that begin with a relative pronoun such as *that* and *which*. Relative clauses should occur immediately after the word or phrase they are modifying:

Yogi Rock, *which is a rock on Mars*, was named for its resemblance to Yogi Bear.

Applications *that are incomplete* will be thrown away.

The biology professor, *who is visiting from Harvard*, was honored at a banquet.

There were many mistakes in the newspaper story, *which was written last week*.

Notice that the relative clauses are placed just after the noun to which they are referring. Look at how the meaning of the first sentence from the examples above is changed when the relative clause is moved:

Yogi Rock was named for its resemblance to Yogi Bear, *which is a rock on Mars*. [*Incorrect*]

The sentence now reads that Yogi Bear is a rock on Mars. We know that this is wrong; Yogi Bear is a cartoon character, and Yogi Rock is the rock on Mars. The placement of modifiers is crucial to the meaning of the sentence.

Look at one more:

According to the Georgia Lottery Corporation, lottery tickets will be disqualified that do not contain the store number, state seal, and encoded ink strip. [*Incorrect*]

The relative clause, *that do not contain the store number, state seal, and encoded ink strip*, has latched onto disqualified, when it should be placed immediately behind the referent, tickets:

According to the Georgia Lottery Corporation, lottery tickets *that do not contain the store number, state seal, and encoded ink strip* will be disqualified. [*Correct*]

Errors with modifiers, including misplaced words, misplaced phrases and clauses, and dangling modifiers, occur on a large percentage of the questions in *The Official Guide to GMAT Review*. It is extremely important to have a firm understanding of their proper placement.