Modifiers

A modifier is a word, phrase, or clause that describes another word or group of words in a sentence. It can add extra information, describe an action, or simply clarify details about a noun in a sentence.

Dangling Modifiers

A dangling modifier is a modifier without something to modify: Whatever it refers to is not in the sentence. Fix a dangling modifier by including the noun it modifies in the sentence.

Incorrect: Having reached the edge of the plateau, the river was visible.
Correct: Having reached the edge of the plateau, we saw the river.

The modifier in the example is the phrase “having reached the edge of the plateau.” In the incorrect sentence, the only noun in the sentence for the modifier to modify is “the river.” The river is probably not doing the action of reaching the edge of the plateau. It also leaves open the question “to whom was the river visible?”

The correct sentence fixes both problems by including the noun “we.” Now the modifier can properly describe the action that “we” took before “we” saw the river.

Misplaced Modifiers

A misplaced modifier confuses readers because it pairs a modifier with the incorrect noun. Fix a misplaced modifier by moving the modifier so that it is next to the word it modifies. Here’s an example of a misplaced modifier that is pretty easy to spot:

Incorrect: We sat in the raft and carefully crossed the river, which was unstable and leaky.
Correct: We sat in the raft, which was unstable and leaky, and carefully crossed the river.

The modifier in this example is the phrase “which was unstable and leaky.” In the incorrect sentence, because it is right next to the words “the river,” it appears to be describing the river. Most readers might only be confused for a second, but writers don’t want to confuse readers for any amount of time.

The correct sentence fixes the problem by putting the modifier right next to the word that it is actually describing: “the raft.” This makes it instantly clear that the raft, not the river, is unstable and leaky.
Here’s another example that’s a little trickier:

Incorrect: Tom told me yesterday I forgot to fill the canteens.
Correct: Yesterday, Tom told me I forgot to fill the canteens.
OR
Tom told me I forgot to fill the canteens yesterday.

In the incorrect sentence, it is not clear what the modifier “yesterday” actually describes: “Tom” telling “me” or the act of filling the canteens. The correct sentences fix the problem by moving the modifier next to whichever it is actually modifying and away from what it is not modifying.

**Essential and Nonessential Modifiers**

Some modifiers cannot be removed from a sentence without changing the sentence’s or a noun’s meaning: these are called essential modifiers. A modifier that adds extra information but does not change a sentence’s or noun’s meaning is called a nonessential modifier.

The biggest way that this distinction affects your writing has to do with punctuation. Essential modifiers do not need commas, but nonessential modifiers need a comma before and a comma after the modifier.

**That and Which**

The words “That” and “Which” begin a type of modifier called a relative clause, which describes a noun or a noun phrase. Although many people use the two words interchangeably, “that” should begin an essential relative clause, and “which” should begin a nonessential relative clause. Here’s an example of two different essential relative clauses:

Essential: The most terrifying moment in any of the trips that I took with Tom was undoubtedly the scrape with the black bear.
Essential: The packing skills that I had been so proud of before the trip turned out to need a lot of improvement before they could rival Tom’s skill with a pack.

In both sentences, the phrases beginning with “that” provide essential information about the nouns (“trips” and “skills”). Try reading the sentences without those phrases. In the first sentence, “trips” becomes less specific (perhaps the author took trips with people other than Tom or perhaps the author is not talking about his or her own trips). In the second sentence, the reader no longer knows whose packing skills the sentence is about.

It is possible, of course, to rewrite both of those sentences to make the essential modifiers unnecessary. Essential and nonessential is often just about how the sentence is written. Here are the sentences again, this time rewritten so that the clauses are nonessential:

Nonessential: The black bear incident, which happened when I was hiking with Tom, was undoubtedly the most terrifying moment in any of my trips.
Nonessential: My packing skills, which I had been so proud of before the trip, turned out to need a lot of improvement before they could rival Tom’s skill with a pack.

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Try reading the sentences without the phrases that begin with “which.” The sentences’ meanings do not change this time.

**Using Who (or Whom)**

When you are referring to a person, use “who” or “whom,” not “that” or “which.” Both “who” and “whom” can begin either essential or nonessential clauses.

Incorrect: *The guide* that I traveled with the most *was Tom.*
Correct: *The guide* whom I traveled with the most *was Tom.*

In the incorrect sentence, “that” refers to Tom, who is a person. Correct it by changing it to “whom.” For more on when to use “who” and when to use “whom,” please see the “Who and Whom” handout. It is an essential clause because the reader loses information about the word “guide” if the clause is removed from the sentence.

Incorrect: *Tom, which wrote a book on wilderness survival,* was my guide most often.
Correct: *Tom, who wrote a book on wilderness survival,* was my guide most often.

This example shows a nonessential clause. It is pretty obvious that “which” is incorrect here: most mistakes of this kind are with the word “that.”

**Practice Activity**

This activity should not take too long, but should provide you with some good practice at recognizing these kinds of modifiers. These are the steps:

1. Find a short article on a website, preferably one that is likely to not have many mistakes, like a newspaper. Print the article.
2. Read the article. While you read, highlight every time “that” or “which” are used.
3. Disregarding any time that the words are used directly after a verb, figure out which clauses are essential and which are nonessential.
4. Did the article use “that” and “which” consistently or interchangeably?

**Contact**

Worried about your use of modifiers or want to talk about your practice activity? Come work with a tutor at the Writing Center! Drop by or use the information below to contact us and set up an appointment.

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