

DANGLING AND MISPLACED MODIFIERS

A dangling modifier is a group of words (often at the beginning or the end of a sentence) that refers to (modifies) a word or phrase that has not been clearly stated in the sentence.

Very often, dangling modifiers are verb phrases (containing an *-ing* verb or a *to+verb* construction) at the beginning of a sentence. These verb phrases do not contain a subject, so, by default, they refer to the **grammatical subject** of the sentence.

- ⊗ *Having fixed the car, dinner was served for the boys.* [the dinner did not fix the car; only a person can do that]
- ⊗ *Not knowing anybody at the party, it was boring for Jacob.* [“it” is not a person and therefore cannot go to a party]
- ⊗ *To make the house tidy, every article of clothing must be put back into Asher’s room.* (“every article of clothing” is not concerned about making the house tidy)

- **Fix dangling modifiers by changing the subject of the main clause to the “doer” implied in the verbal phrase.**
 - ⊗ *Having fixed the car, Asher and Jacob were served dinner.*
 - ⊗ *Not knowing anybody at the party, Jacob found it boring.*
 - ⊗ *To make the house tidy, every article of clothing must be put back into Asher’s room.*
- **Another way to fix dangling modifiers is to turn the verbal phrase into a subordinate clause by giving it a subject of its own.**
 - ⊗ *After the boys had fixed the car, Mother served them dinner..*
 - ⊗ *Because he did not know anybody at the party, Jacob found it boring.*
 - ⊗ *If he wants to make the house tidy, Ashton must put every article of clothing back into his room.*

☛ **DANGER!** Simply putting the dangling modifier at the end of the sentence does not fix the problem!

- ⊗ *The party was boring not knowing anybody.*
- ⊗ *Every article of clothing must be put away to make the house tidy.*

A misplaced modifier is placed so far from the word it modifies that it is difficult for the reader to understand the connection. Sometimes, misplaced modifiers create unintentional humor—but the joke is on the writer, unfortunately.

- ⊗ *Asher provides a map for Jacob reduced to a tiny scale on a napkin.* [that’s a very small Jacob!]
- ⊗ *The patient returned to the clinic where he underwent heart surgery in 1982 in a limousine sent by the White House.* [I call that healthcare on the go!]
- ⊗ *Mother received a recipe for making latkes from her mother in law.* [a bit macabre, eh?]

- **Fix a misplaced modifier by moving it as closely as possible to the word it goes with. If the misplaced modifier refers to the subject of the sentence, you can put it at the beginning.**
 - ⊗ *For Jacob, Asher provides a map reduced to a tiny scale on a napkin.*
 - ⊗ *In a limousine sent by the White House, the patient returned to the clinic where he underwent heart surgery in 1982.*
 - ⊗ *Mother received a recipe from her mother-in-law for making latkes.*

► Did you like the sample sentences? Get the whole story in Joshua Braff’s *The Unthinkable Thoughts of Jacob Green*.