

Misplaced? Dangling? Whose modifier is it, anyway?

A modifier is a word that changes our sense of another word, such as a noun. In the phrase *curly hair*, the adjective *curly* makes us visualize the hair in a certain way. Phrases can modify, too. “On her way to town, Anne met Shastri.” *On her way to town* modifies Anne. We see her doing something specific.

Sometimes, modifiers can get misplaced. Read the following sentence:

Running down the stairs, the pins in Estelle’s hair came undone.

You probably recognize that the writer intended you to imagine Estelle running down the stairs, hair pins falling behind her. But the writer actually told us that the pins were running down the stairs. In other words, the modifier *Running down the stairs* was misplaced.

You could fix the sentence in many ways. Here are two possibilities:

(1) Running down the stairs, Estelle lost all the pins from her hair.

Notice that the modifier *Running down the stairs* is placed right next to the noun it modifies—Estelle.

(2) As Estelle ran down the stairs, her hair pins came undone.

This version places Estelle and what she’s doing together in the same dependent clause.

A misplaced modifier can often be moved. Problem solved. But what about a dangling modifier? Read the following sentence:

Driving to Boston, the brakes in Ben’s car went out.

Again, you understand that the brakes in Ben’s car were not driving to Boston. But that’s actually what the writer told you. Although you realize intuitively that Ben is the individual who was driving to Boston, when you look for Ben in the sentence, he’s not there. His car is, but not Ben himself. In other words, the noun being modified isn’t in the sentence at all.

A modifier that is intended to modify a noun that isn’t actually in the sentence is known as a dangling modifier. It’s not misplaced because the noun it belongs with isn’t present at all.

The bottom line? Check your writing to ensure that modifiers are closely linked to the nouns they modify.