Problems with Modifiers

A modifier is a word, phrase, or clause that gives greater detail or specificity to another word.

Here are some sentences that include modifiers:

- Kurt almost broke the world-record.
- Even Mary said the rule was unfair.
- It was only his boss on the phone.

In each of these sentences, modifiers are used to make the sentence more specific. For example, the word “almost” lets the reader know how close Kurt came to breaking the record. “Even” implies that many people (including Mary) discussed the rule. And “only” provides greater detail by telling us exactly who was on the phone (and, as a result, revealing that no one else was on the phone).

However, modifiers can be confusing if they are placed incorrectly within a sentence because they can completely change the meaning of a particular portion of text.

- You can only lead a horse to water; you can’t make it drink.
- Only you can lead a horse to water; you can’t make it drink.
- You can lead only a horse to water; you can’t make it drink.
- You can lead a horse only to water; you can’t make it drink.

Each sentence uses the exact same words, and each sentence is grammatically correct. However, changing the location of the modifier “only” also drastically changes the meaning of each sentence. The first sentence discusses the “only” action that you have regarding the horse, while the second sentence stresses that you (and “only” you) can interact with the horse. The third sentence notes that the horse is the “only” animal that you can lead, while the fourth sentences emphasizes that water is the “only” possible destination for the horse.

Another common problem with modifiers is what’s called a “dangling modifier.” Dangling modifiers are usually phrases that are unclear about the word which they are trying to modify.

- Running from the scene of the accident, the car exploded behind me.

In this sentence, the phrase “running from the scene of the accident” is meant to modify something else in the sentence. However, in this sentence, it is actually a dangling modifier in that it falsely implies that the “car” is running from the accident, rather than the person (“me”).
The simplest way to fix dangling modifiers is to rewrite the sentence so that the word being modified is more clearly connected to the modifying phrase.

• As I ran from the scene of the accident, the car exploded behind me.
• Running from the scene of the accident, I heard the car explode behind me.

This handout is adapted from University of Alabama Writing Center Website. Only the format has been changed.