



Figure 1 The Writing Center and Academic Resource Center logo

MODIFIERS

A *modifier* is a word, phrase, or clause that describes another word or word group. Many types of words and phrases can act as modifiers, such as adjectives, adverbs, and prepositional phrases. Look at the following sentence:

Sally kicked the red ball.

An adjective, **red**, describes a noun, **ball**. This means that the word **red** is a modifier.

There are many different types of modifiers. Let's begin by taking a look at the most common ones.

Adjectives

We already know that adjectives act as modifiers. An *adjective* is a word that describes a noun. An adjective can describe the kind or amount of a noun.

For example:

Chad thought that the **blue** shirt looked good on him.

There are **many** students in the classroom.

Adverbs

While an adjective modifies a noun, an *adverb* is a word that modifies a verb or adjective. It answers the question of "how?"

For example:

Betsy likes to sing **loudly** during music class.

In this sentence, the adverb **loudly** describes the verb **sing**. (How does she sing? Loudly.)

Arthur was **extremely** tired at the end of the day.

Here, the adverb **extremely** describes the adjective **tired**. (How tired is he? Extremely.)

Prepositional Phrases

Prepositions are words that describe the place, direction, or time of something. In sentences, they are combined with nouns to form *prepositional phrases*. These phrases act as modifiers for other words. They usually have the same effect as an adjective or adverb.

For example:

The boy ran **towards the tree**.

In this sentence, **towards the tree** is a prepositional phrase. It contains the preposition **towards** and the noun **tree**. This phrase works like an adverb because it modifies the verb **ran**.

The lamp **beside the bed** was off.

The prepositional phrase in this sentence is **beside the bed**. It contains the preposition **beside** and the noun **bed**. This phrase acts as an adjective because it modifies the noun **lamp**.

Commonly Used Prepositions			
About	Before	Except	Over
Above	Behind	For	Through
Across	Below	From	To
After	Beneath	In	Toward
Against	Beside	Into	Under
Along	Between	Near	Up
Among	By	Of	With
Around	Down	Off	Within
At	During	On	

Some people say that a preposition is anything that a plane can do to a cloud.



Figure 2 A drawing of an airplane.

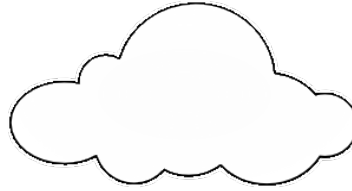


Figure 3 An image of a cloud

This plane can go above the cloud, around the cloud, beneath the cloud, etc.

Limiting Modifiers

A *limiting modifier*, as its name suggests, modifies a word by limiting it.

For example:

Stephen takes **only** two classes.

The modifier **only** limits the word **two**, showing us that the number of classes that Stephen takes is limited to two.

Janice recieved **barely** a C on her essay.

Here, **barely** limits the words **a C**. This means that Janice's C was not very high.

Exercise 1: Circle the modifier or modifiers in each of the following sentences.

1. Maria opened the blue book and began to read.
2. Tyler did not like how loudly the music was playing.
3. The bookshelf against the wall had only three books on it.
4. Stephanie hurriedly put on the big, brown coat.
5. The yellow shoes were tied neatly and tucked into the shoebox.

Common Mistakes with Modifiers

Modifiers can cause a lot of confusion even for experienced writers. It's very easy to put a modifier in the wrong place and give it an unintended meaning. Let's take a look at some of the common mistakes people make with modifiers.

Misplaced Modifier

The sentence

Tom read the book **on the chair**.

has two possible meanings.

It could mean that Tom was **on the chair** while he read the book.



Figure 3 An image of a man reading in a chair.



Figure 4 An image of a chair. *1*

It could also mean that the book was **on the chair** while Tom was reading it.

- The sentence is confusing because it contains a **misplaced modifier**.

A **misplaced modifier** is the result of not following one of the most basic rules concerning modifiers:

Modifiers usually need to be placed directly next to the words they modify.

- To see how this applies, let's take another look at the sentence:
Tom read the book on the chair.

The phrase **on the chair** is a *prepositional phrase* modifier. Since the writer placed it next to the word **book**, the phrase is actually describing **the book** instead of **Tom**. If we want to describe **Tom**, we need to follow the rule and place **on the chair** right next to the word **Tom**, like this:

On the chair, Tom read the book.

- It is especially easy to misplace *limiting modifiers* so that they limit the wrong words.

Jerry **only** goes to school on Tuesdays.

In this sentence, **only** is placed next to the word **goes**, meaning that, on Tuesdays, Jerry's action is limited to **going** to school. In other words, on Tuesdays, Jerry goes to school, but he does not come back.

The sentence should be written:

Jerry goes to school **only** on Tuesdays.

In this version, the word **only** limits the phrase **on Tuesdays**, meaning that Jerry goes to school **on Tuesdays**, but not any other day of the week.

- Remember that phrases can sometimes act as modifiers as well.

The child built a sand castle **playing in the sand**.

Since the sand castle was not playing in the sand, the sentence should say:

Playing in the sand, the child built a sand castle.

Exercise 3: Correct the *misplaced modifiers* in the following sentences.

1. In a jar, Cynthia kept the pickles.
2. Joe found an interesting article reading the newspaper.
3. Michael checked for his shoes under the bed.

4. Lilly only wears designer clothing.
5. Change is only good in some situations.

Dangling Modifier

Like a *misplaced modifier*, a *dangling modifier* modifies the wrong word. However, while a *misplaced modifier* is simply not placed next to the correct word, a sentence with a *dangling modifier* does not even contain the word that the modifier should be next to.

For example:

While **escaping from the garage**, the boiler exploded.

The modifier **escaping from the garage** is next to the noun **the boiler**. If we follow the rule of where to place modifiers, we must assume that the boiler was escaping from the garage. Obviously, this is not correct. If this were a *misplaced modifier*, we could simply move the modifier next to the correct word. We cannot do that here because the sentence does not mention who or what was escaping. In order to fix this sentence, we need to add a word that indicates who or what did the escaping.

While Jim was **escaping from the garage**, the boiler exploded.

In this version of the sentence, the modifier **escaping from the garage** has been placed next to **Jim**. We now know that the person who was escaping from the garage was **Jim** and not **the boiler**.

To fix a *dangling modifier*, always ask, “*What is this modifier trying to describe?*” In our example, the modifier **escaping from the garage** is trying to describe **Jim**.

Exercise 4: Correct the *dangling modifiers* in the following sentences.

1. Entering the room, the picture caught my eye.
2. When inside the office, the noise seemed much louder.
3. Walking down the street, the dog chased him.
4. Already nervous, the exam made things even worse.
5. Already full, the extra drop of water made the glass overflow.

Modifiers that Split an Infinitive

A verb has many forms. For example, the verb **to jump** has the forms **jump**, **jumps**, **jumping**, **will jump**, **have jumped**, and even more. Its simplest form is **to jump**. This is known as the *infinitive* form. All verbs have an *infinitive* form. We

use *infinitives* all of the time, primarily when we use two verbs in a row. The second verb in a pair of verbs is generally put in *infinitive* form. For example:

I want **to ride** my bicycle.

Because the verb **want** comes first, the second verb must be placed in *infinitive* form; this is why we say **to ride** instead of just **ride**. The word **to** is known as the verb's *auxiliary*.

The use of infinitives is important when examining modifiers because writers sometimes make the mistake of *splitting an infinitive* by placing the modifier in between the *auxiliary* and the verb. For example:

I tried **to** quickly **finish** with my homework.

In this sentence, the infinitive **to finish** has been split. This makes the sentence somewhat confusing and awkward. The sentence could have been written like this:

I tried **to finish** with my homework quickly.

Here, the infinitive has been reassembled. The sentence is now much less awkward.

Exercise 5: Correct the following modifiers that split infinitives.

1. Edward tried to stealthily sneak into the classroom.
2. I had to speedily run around the track.
3. When I want to succesfully write an essay, I visit the Writing Center.
4. Thomas had to hurriedly finish his breakfast to avoid being late.
5. You have to really slam that door if you want it to stay shut.

For answers to these exercises, please consult with a Writing Center tutor.

This handout is based on the following sources:

Lunsford, Andrea A. The Everyday Writer. 2nd ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001. Print.

Hacker, Diana. A Pocket Style Manual. 3rd ed. Boston: Bedford, 2000. Print.

For further reference, see the following books:

Troyka, Lynn Q. Quick Access: Reference for Writers. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1995. Print.

Hacker, Diana. A Writer's Reference. 4th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1999. Print.

All of the above texts are available in the Writing Center.