THE DANGLING MODIFIER

Recognize a dangling modifier when you find one.

Modifiers are words, phrases, or clauses that add description. In clear, logical sentences, you will often find modifiers right next to—either in front of or behind—the target words they logically describe.

Read this example:

Horrified, Mom snatched the deviled eggs from Jack, whose fingers were covered in cat hair.

Notice that horrified precedes Mom, its target, just as deviled sits right before eggs. Whose fingers were covered in cat hair immediately follows Jack, its target.

Sometimes, however, an inexperienced writer will include a modifier but forget the target. The modifier thus dangles because it has nothing in the sentence to describe.

Dangling modifiers are errors. This poor method of sentence construction confuses readers.

Review the examples below:

Hungry, the leftover pizza was devoured.

Hungry is a single-word adjective. Notice that there is no one in the sentence for this modifier to describe.

Rummaging in her giant handbag, the sunglasses escaped detection.

Rummaging in her giant handbag is a participle phrase. In this sentence, no word exists for this phrase to modify. Neither sunglasses nor detection has fingers to make rummaging possible!

With a sigh of disappointment, the expensive dress was returned to the rack.
With a sigh of disappointment is a string of prepositional phrases. If you look carefully, you do not find anyone in the sentence capable of feeling disappointed. Neither dress nor rack has emotions!

Know how to fix a dangling modifier.

Fixing a dangling modifier will require more than rearranging the words in the sentence. You will often need to add something new so that the modifier finally has a target word to describe:

Hungry, we devoured the leftover pizza.

Rummaging in her giant handbag, Frieda failed to find her sunglasses.

With a sigh of disappointment, Charlene returned the expensive dress to the rack.