Finding and Fixing Misplaced and Dangling Modifiers

Understand the problem.

Think of modifiers as arrows and the words that they describe as bull's-eyes. For clear, logical sentences, writers aim modifiers so that they strike as close to the intended targets as possible.

Read this example:

Sneering with superiority, Roland drank iced tea from a crystal glass that sparkled in the afternoon sun.

*Sneering with superiority,* a participle phrase, describes *Roland,* the noun right after it. *That sparkled in the afternoon sun,* a relative clause, describes *glass,* the noun in front.

Recognizing Misplaced Modifiers

When a writer's aim is off and too much distance separates the modifier from its target, a misplaced modifier is the result.

Consider this example:

Sucking warm water from a rubber hose, envious looks were shot Roland's way as the other picnickers quenched their own thirst.

*Sucking warm water from a rubber hose,* a participle phrase, should describe *picnickers,* but since that noun is so far away, the phrase seems to be modifying *envious looks,* which don't have mouths that can drink from a hose!
Recognizing Dangling Modifiers

If the sentence fails to include a target, the modifier is **dangling**.

Read this example:

_with a sigh of pleasure, consumption of cucumber sandwiches commenced._

We assume that Roland is the one sighing with pleasure and eating cucumber sandwiches, but notice that he is not in the sentence, so we cannot tell for sure!

**Know the solution.**

Misplaced and dangling modifiers make sentences awkward and inelegant. They keep sentences from expressing clear, straightforward ideas. When you discover a misplaced or dangling modifier in a sentence, you will need to rearrange and/or revise the sentence parts to untangle the idea the sentence wants to express.

Fixing Misplaced Modifiers

Rearranging sentence parts will often fix a misplaced modifier. Remember that most modifiers come as close to their targets as possible.

Here is the original error:

_sucking warm water from a rubber hose, envious looks were shot Roland's way as the other picnickers quenched their own thirst._

If we move things around, the modifier hits the right target:

_sucking warm water from a rubber hose, the other picnickers quenched their own thirst as they shot envious looks Roland's way._

Now we have picnickers drinking from the rubber hose, which is clear and logical!
Fixing Dangling Modifiers

To fix a dangling modifier, you will need to add a target to the sentence and then tweak the remaining words to make sense.

Here is the original error without a logical target:

With a sigh of pleasure, consumption of cucumber sandwiches commenced.

Notice that the addition of a target makes the sentence clear:

With a sigh of pleasure, Roland began to consume cucumber sandwiches.

After Roland sighed with pleasure, he began to consume cucumber sandwiches.

Now we know who got to eat that delicious snack!