

# THE MISPLACED MODIFIER

## Recognize a misplaced modifier when you find one.

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**Modifiers** are words, **phrases**, or **clauses** that add description to **sentences**. Typically, you will find a modifier right next to—either in front of or behind—the word it logically describes.

Take the simple, one-word **adjective** *blue*. If we add it to the sentence below, where should it go?

At a downtown dealership, Kara bought a truck from a salesman with a comb-over.

Should we locate *blue* next to *dealership*? A *blue* downtown *dealership*? A *blue Kara*? A *blue salesman*? A *blue comb-over*? Of course not! Logic dictates that *blue* can describe only one word, *truck*, so we must place the modifier next to that word:

At a downtown dealership, Kara bought a **blue truck** from a salesman with a comb-over.

In a similar manner, multi-word phrases and clauses often go right next to the word they describe.

Here are examples:

**Gazing out the window**, Paul missed the homework assignment that Professor Zuromski wrote on the board.

*Gazing out the window* is a **participle phrase** describing *Paul*, the **noun** that follows.

Sam gobbled the sandwich, **which was soggy with tomato slices**, as he rushed to class.

*Which was soggy with tomato slices* is an **adjective clause** describing *sandwich*, the noun before it.

As the hurricane approached, we watched the tree branches **waving in the strong breeze**.

***Waving in the strong breeze*** is a participle phrase describing ***branches***, the noun in front.

Sometimes a writer places the modifier too far away from the word it should describe. Born in the confusion is a *misplaced* modifier, an error.

Read these examples:

**Churning in the Atlantic Ocean**, we anxiously watched the weather report for information about the hurricane.

***Churning in the Atlantic Ocean*** is a participle phrase. In this sentence, it is describing the **pronoun** we. How illogical! ***We*** cannot churn in an ocean!

Raymond wore his one collared shirt to the job interview, **which was unfortunately stained with yellow mustard**.

***Which was unfortunately stained with yellow mustard*** is an adjective clause. In the sentence above, this clause is describing ***interview***, the noun in front. But an interview cannot get stained with a condiment!

**Burnt to a crisp**, Professor Jones ruined another bagel in the ancient toaster in his office.

***Burnt to a crisp*** is a participle phrase. In this sentence, the phrase is describing ***Professor Jones***, the noun after it. A more logical candidate is the ***bagel*** later in the sentence.

## Know how to fix a misplaced modifier.

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To fix the error, locate the modifier next to the appropriate word:

We anxiously watched the weather report for information about the hurricane **churning in the Atlantic Ocean**.

Raymond wore his one collared **shirt, which was unfortunately stained with yellow mustard**, to the job interview.

Professor Jones waited for the slacker **student who was late with another essay**.

