Modifiers

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What are modifiers? How do they function in sentences?

Modifiers are words, phrases, and clauses that affect and often enhance the meaning of a sentence. Modifiers offer detail that can make a sentence more engaging, clearer, or specific. The simplest form of a modifier would be an adjective or adverb. But again, modifiers can come in the form of phrases and clauses that act like adjectives and adverbs.

What are some examples of the types of modifiers that writers use?

Adjectival clause (acts as an adjective)

My sister, **who is an engineer**, works next door.

- "who is an engineer," the *dependent clause* (one that cannot stand alone; an incomplete thought), describes (or modifies) the noun "sister."

- Adjectival clauses usually begin with a relative pronoun (that, which, who, whom, whose) or a relative adverb (where, when, why).

Adverbial clause (acts as adverb)

Because I was so tired, I went to bed.

- "Because I was so tired" describes the action of "going to bed."

- A trick: adverb clauses usually answer the *how*, *when*, and *why* of actions. *Why* did I go to bed? *Because I was so tired.*

- Adverbial clauses usually begin with subordinating conjunctions.
     Time: after, when, until, soon, before,
     Condition: if, whether or not, provided, in case, unless
     Cause and effect: because, as, since, so, in order that, now that, inasmuch as
     Contrast: though, although, while, whereas, even though

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Demonstratives

this year; **these** people; **that** car; back in **those** days

- Demonstratives point to particular nouns.

- Near or far? "this" and "these" refer to "near" nouns; "that" and "those" refer to "far" nouns.

- Come before the noun they modify.

Possessive adjectives/determiners

my paper; **their** happiness; **your** dog; **his, her, its, our.**

- Usually used in front of a noun to express possession.

- Possessive pronouns (**mine, yours, his, hers, theirs, ours**) are related, but they usually come after the noun they are expressing possession of. Example: *The lunch is* **mine**.

Prepositional phrase

The people **in the audience** roared with laughter.

- "in the audience" adds further meaning to "the people."

- Prepositional phrases often answer *how* or *why* nouns are related to other words in the sentence. In this example, the phrase answers *why* "people" are roaring with laughter, because they are "in the audience," presumably of some hilarious comedy show.

What are some common errors when using modifiers?

Because modifiers can exist in the form of groups of words—phrases and clauses—it is easy to misplace them in writing. Just like adjectives and adverbs need to be in the correct location with respect to the nouns and verbs they modify, adjectival and adverbial clauses, prepositional phrases, and other modifiers need to be placed such that they correctly modify their intended words/groups of words.

Modifiers

Below are four common errors writers make when using modifiers.

<u>Dangling modifier</u>

After watching the movie, the book still seems better.

- The adverbial phrase "after watching the movie" incorrectly modifies "the book." This doesn't make sense since a book cannot watch a movie. The modifier is dangling because the word it is supposed to modify—the name of or pronoun for the person who watched the movie—is not there.

- A correction: After watching the movie, *he still thinks* the book is better.

<u>Misplaced modifier</u>

Joe thought about throwing a party for his dad **while he walked in the park**.

- As it is, this sentence says that Joe thought about throwing the party while his dad walked in the park. That doesn't make sense—his dad wouldn't be there—and it is unclear.

- The modifier "while he walked in the park" is misplaced. Is it referring to Joe or his dad?

- A correction: *While he walked in the park,* Joe thought about throwing a party for his dad.

<u>Ambiguous (squinting modifiers)</u>

Explaining your premises **clearly** enhances your argument.

- In this sentence, "clearly" could modify "explaining your premises," as in explaining them *clearly*, or it could modify "enhances your argument," as in *clearly* enhancing it.

- A correction: Explaining your premises *will clearly* enhance your argument.