

Dangling Modifiers in English

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Abstract

Learning proper grammar and usage rules for the English language can be a complex and confusing task which can often end in frustration. Learning about modifiers, especially if you are out of school or struggling in school, is often a source of that frustration. In English sentences, many dangling modifiers occur at the beginning of sentences - often as introductory clauses or phrases, but can also appear at the end. A dangling modifier is a phrase or clause that modifies a word not clearly stated in the sentence, or that does not connect grammatically with what it is intended to modify. Dangling modifiers can make the meaning of the sentence unclear, so they should be avoided. In this paper, the meaning of dangling modifiers is being discussed. Besides, the researcher has presented the markers through which these/such modifiers can be recognized by learners of English. To make the presentation even more exhaustive, the researcher has offered corrections of dangling modifiers.

1. Introduction

The English language is one of the most fascinating subjects that we can investigate, and those of us who speak and write English can find pleasure in seeking to understand its various aspects. Although the English language is flexible and continually changing, it is possible to follow certain principles and to observe certain characteristics of usage which can make grammar a relatively exact study and one which can widen the scope of the individual in a satisfying way. Knowledge of Standard English and its acceptable forms is basic to the education of all college students. Learning a grammatical term is an essential step toward understanding what is correct and what is incorrect in speech and writing.

The dangling modifier is one of the most insidious and confusion-causing problems in the English language. A dangling modifier is a word or phrase that modifies a word not clearly stated in the sentence. A modifier describes, clarifies, or gives more detail about a concept.

2. Modifiers

Modifiers are important elements of writing, describing and qualifying another word to craftily change its meaning. As such, they are often employed across many pieces of writing to stellar results. Unfortunately, they are also misused in a huge way. A modifier must always have a word to modify. This fact seems almost too obvious to warrant discussion. And

yet we frequently see sentences similar in construction to this one: "Hearing a number of entertaining stories, our visit was thoroughly enjoyable". "*Hearing a number of entertaining stories*", is a modifying phrase. But where in the sentence is there a word for it to modify? Certainly the phrase cannot logically modify *visit*: it was not our visit that heard a number of entertaining stories. Who did hear the stories? *We* did. Since, however, the word (**we**) does not appear in the sentence for the phrase to modify, the phrase is said to "dangle" (Overby, 1990:185).

3.

Dangling Modifier

According to McArthur, Tom (1992:352-353), a dangling modifier is a specific case of which is the dangling participle is an error in sentence structure whereby a grammatical modifier is associated with a word other than the one intended, or with no particular word at all. For example, a writer may have meant to modify the subject, but word order makes the modifier seem to modify an object instead. Such ambiguities can lead to unintentional humour or difficulty in understanding a sentence.

The dangling modifier is one of the most insidious and confusion-causing problems in the English language. Dangling modifiers usually occur when a group of words (most often a verbal phrase) is not clearly connected to the word it modifies. When the modifier occurs at the beginning of the sentence, readers usually expect it to modify the subject of the sentence. When it does not logically do that, the modifier is said to dangle. A dangling modifier can change the intended meaning of the sentence dramatically, which makes readers have to slow down in order to sort out the meaning. The dangling modifier also sometimes creates strange images in readers' minds (Azar, 1999:87).

A typical example of a dangling modifier is illustrated in the sentence "**Turning the corner, a handsome school building appeared**" (Merriam Webster, 1995:315). The modifying clause **Turning the corner** is clearly supposed to describe the behaviour of the narrator (or other observer), but grammatically it appears to apply to nothing in particular, or to the school building. Similarly, in the sentence "**At the age of eight, my family finally bought a dog**", the modifier "**At the age of eight**" **"dangles"** in mid-air, attaching to no named person or thing (Wilson and Glazier, 2008:134).

"**looking toward the west**" can logically refer. Since the modifier, "**looking toward the west**", is sitting next to the funnel shaped cloud, the sentence suggests that the cloud is doing the looking.

6. **When nine years old**, my mother enrolled in medical school.

↑
Dangling modifier

This sentence means that my mother enrolled in medical school when she was nine years old!

At other times the dangling modifier is placed next to the wrong noun or noun substitute, e.g.:

7. **Walking to the movies**, the cloud burst drenched jim.

↑
Dangling modifier

Because of the placement of walking to the movies, this sentence suggests that the cloudburst is walking to the movies even though a possible walker - Jim - is mentioned later (ibid: 131).

8. **Having fixed the night before**, Priscilla could use the car.

↑
Dangling modifier

Since having been fixed the night before is placed next to Priscilla, the sentence means that Priscilla was fixed the night before.

As the above examples show, dangling modifiers result in inaccurate and sometimes ludicrous statements (ibid: 132).

4. Recognizing Dangling Modifiers

It is important that you recognize dangling modifiers when you see them. Such modifiers usually appear as two types of constructions – as *verbal phrases* and as *elliptical clauses* (is a dependent clause in which the subject and/or verb are omitted) (Overby, 1990:143-144):

9. *Hearing a number of entertaining stories*, our visit was thoroughly enjoyable. [Dangling participial phrase]

10. *On entering the room*, refreshments were being served.
[Dangling gerund phrase]
11. *To play tennis well*, the racket must be held properly.
[Dangling infinitive phrase]
12. *When only three years old*, my father took me to a circus.
[Dangling elliptical phrase]

In each of the examples given above, the dangling modifier stands at the beginning of the sentence. If the modifier were not dangling—that is, if it were correctly used—it would be related to the subject of the sentence. In none of these sentences, however, can the introductory modifier logically refer to the subject. If the error is not immediately apparent, try placing the modifier just after the subject. The dangling nature of the modifier becomes easily recognizable because of the illogical meaning which results when you say, "**Our visit, hearing a number of entertaining stories, was thoroughly enjoyable**", or "**Refreshments, on entering the room, were served**".

Dangling modifiers frequently appear at the end as well as at the beginning of sentences. The participial phrase dangles in the sentence "**The dog had only one eye, caused by an accident**".

At this point an exception to the rules governing the recognition of dangling modifiers should be noted: some introductory verbal phrases are general or summarizing expressions and therefore need not refer to the subject which follows (ibid: 144-145):

13. **Correct:** *Generally speaking*, the boys' themes were more interesting than the girls'.
14. **Correct:** *To sum up*, our vacation was a disaster from start to finish.

5. Correcting Dangling Modifiers

Dangling modifiers may be corrected in two general ways (Martin and McChesney, 1977:190):

May be corrected to:

20. When I was nine years old, my mother enrolled in medical school.

↑ ↙
Subject Verb

Now the sentence means that I (not my mother!) was nine years old when my mother enrolled in medical school.

Using the same method, the dangling modifier

21. Having been fixed the night before, Priscilla could use the car.

↑
Dangling modifier

May be corrected to:

22. Since the car had been fixed the night before, Priscilla could use it.

↑
subject

Now the sentence means that the car (not Priscilla!) was fixed.

6. Types of Dangling Modifier

There are four types of dangling modifiers, depending on the variety of modifier being used. A modifier can contain (Clara, 1982:188):

1. A participle phrase.
2. A preposition followed by a second phrase.
3. An infinitive phrase.
4. An elliptical phrase.

6.1 Dangling Participle Phrase

Participle



34. Clear: **When I was travelling, my passport is in my inside pocket.**
35. Unclear: **After looking out for the window for hours, the storm passed.**
36. Clear: **After looking out for the window for hours, I saw the storm had passed.**
37. Clear: **After I had looked out for the window for hours, the storm passed (ibid: 190).**

6.3 Dangling Infinitive Phrase

The infinitive phrase should probably modify the person(s) who does something (ibid: 191):

38. Unclear: **To wash the car, soap and water is needed.**
39. Clear: **To wash the car, you need soap and water.**
40. Unclear: **To be successful students, good study habits need to be developed.**
41. Clear: **To be successful students, we need to develop good study habits.**

6.4 Elliptical Clause

An elliptical clause is one in which the subject or verb is implied rather than stated. The subject of the main clause or else it is dangling (ibid: 191):

42. Unclear: **Drinking a cup of coffee, the cat leaped on the table.**
43. Clear: **Drinking a cup of coffee, I saw the cat leap on the table.**

7. Differences Between Dangling and Misplaced Modifiers

Dangling Modifiers are phrases that begin sentence and simply dangle there with no clear subject.

Examples:

44. **While hiking along with our camping gear, a bear crossed our path.**
45. **Having enjoyed the movie, it was late and time to go home.**
46. **To do well in any endeavor, determination is necessary.**

The subject is not clear in any of the sample sentences. In the first sentence, the bear seems to be the subject, but bears are not known for hiking along anyone's camping gear. In the second, the reader is not told who enjoyed the movie; it certainly wasn't "it". In the third example, it is not clear who must be determined.

Corrections:

47. **While hiking along with our camping gear, we saw a bear cross our path.**
48. **Having enjoyed the movie, we realized it was late and time to go home.**
49. **To do well in any endeavor, people must possess determination.**

Misplaced modifiers are phrases that are out of place, and, as a result, are modifying the wrong subject (Carillo, 2003:70):

Examples:

50. **She left the 19th century bench to be sold at auction with the antique dealer.**
51. **The general spoke to the troops who had survived the attack with apparent emotion.**
52. **The farmers in the Midwest almost harvested 20 million bushels of wheat last year.**

In the first sentence, it sounds as if the bench and the dealer are going to be sold together. In the second, it sounds as if the "apparent emotion" of the troops enabled them to survive the attack. Finally, in the last example, it

seems as though the dairy farmers, instead of harvesting wheat that totaled 20 million bushels, did not harvest any wheat at all.

Corrections:

53. **She left the 19th century bench with the antique dealer to be sold at auction.**

54. **The general, with apparent emotion, spoke to the troops who had survived the attack.**

55. **The farmers in the Midwest harvest almost 20 million bushels of wheat last year.**

Dangling modifiers have four types (dangling participle phrase, preposition followed by a second phrase, dangling infinitive phrase, and elliptical clause). **Misplaced modifiers** generally take one of the following forms (Carol, 1994:95):

1. As Single Word Modifier

You must be careful about where you put limiting modifiers. Words such as “hardly, only, almost, just, merely, even, nearly, barely, simply, etc”.

56. Unclear: **Mary only misses me.**

57. Clear: **Mary missed only me.**

2. As Prepositional Phrase

The most common type of phrase modifiers is the prepositional phrase, but when a phrase is misplaced, it can cause confusion.

58. Unclear: **Mary bought a book from a boy with a lot of pages.**

59. Clear: **Mary bought a book with a lot of pages from a boy.**

3. Misplaced Clause Modifiers

A misplaced modifier happens when a relative clause or phrase is too far from the word it modifies.

60. Unclear: **Mary put the hat on her head that she bought from Japan.**

61. Clear: **Mary put the hat that she bought from Japan on her head.**

4. Non-Finite Clause (ed-participle, ing-participle, to-infinitive)

62. Unclear: **A boy was hit by a truck running across the road.**

63. Clear: **A boy running across the road was hit by a truck.**

5. Adverbial Clause

64. Unclear: **Mary met her mother when she was playing cards.**

65. Clear: **When Mary was playing cards, she met her mother.**

6. Split Infinitive

A word or phrase placed in a position so that it modifies either a preceding word or the word after it. Avoid placing long, disruptive modifiers between the “To” and the verb of an infinitive and a long adverb between “Subject” and “Verb” can be difficult and confusing. An infinitive is not considered a verb, but a phrase.

66. Unclear: **Kuwait, after the Gulf war ended in 1991, began returning to normal.**

67. Clear: **After the Gulf war ended in 1991, Kuwait began returning to normal.**

A dangling modifier could be corrected in two ways as mentioned before. Sara, B., Young (1982:160-161) suggests that, misplaced modifiers could be corrected in three simple steps:

1. Find the modifier.
2. Identify what word the modifier was intended to modify.
3. Place the modifier as close as possible to the word, phrase, or clause it is supposed to describe.

68. **INCORRECT: The store sold inflatable children’s toys.**

STEP 1: The modifier is *inflatable*.

STEP 2: The modifier, *inflatable*, is closest to the word *children*. Thus, the sentence reads as though the children are inflatable, instead of the toys.

STEP 3: In order to correct the misplaced modifier, *toys* and *inflatable* must be moved closer together.

After following the three steps above, the example is corrected as:

69. CORRECT: The store sold inflatable toys for children.

CONCLUSION

It is no longer surprising to find modifiers used in a bad manner. Whether dangling or misplaced, they muddy up the sentence, potentially creating confusion and changing its meaning. As mentioned before, a dangler modifier describes a particular object that is not in the sentence at all. In conclusion, in order to avoid the confusion generated by misplaced or dangling modifiers, whenever writers have a word, phrase, or clause that is modifying (saying something about) another word, phrase, or clause, they should place the modifier as close as possible to whatever it is intended to modify. If you suspect a sentence of having a dangling modifier, check it by inserting the nearest noun into the modifier and turning it into a complete sentence. If the result is logical and true, the modifier is most likely properly placed. If the result does not create a logical meaning, the modifier is likely dangling. It is very important to know how to recognize and correct dangling modifiers.

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الواصفات المتهدلة في اللغة الانكليزية

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المستخلص

إن تعلم قواعد و استخدامات اللغة الانكليزية غالبا" ما تكون عملية مريكة و صعبة و أحيانا تنتهي بشكل بفشل.و التعلم عن الواصفات ، و بالأخص إذا كنت خارج أو داخل المدرسة هي بحد ذاتها عملية مريكة. الكثير من الواصفات المتهدلة في جمل اللغة الانكليزية تأتي في بداية الجمل غالبا" ما تكون على شكل جمل أو عبارات ، و أيضا" يمكنها إن تظهر في نهاية الجمل. إن الواصف المتهدل هو عبارة عن جملة أو عبارة تقوم بوصف كلمة غير واضحة في الجملة أو لا تتصل قواعديا" على ما تنوي وصفه. يمكن للواصفات المتهدلة تجعل معنى الجملة غير واضح لذا يجب تجنبها قدر الإمكان. في هذا البحث تمت مناقشة معنى الواصفات المتهدلة بالإضافة إلى إن الباحث شخص الطريقة التي يمكن لدارسي اللغة الانكليزية تميز هذا النوع من الواصفات و لجعل هذا البحث أكثر فائدة قام الباحث بتوفير طرق تصحيح الأخطاء التي تحدثها الواصفات المتهدلة.