

Writing Module

Sentence Clarity

Sentence clarity enables the reader to understand the intended meaning of the sentence without having to guess.

A **modifier** is a word or phrase that describes, restricts, or qualifies another word or phrase.

Place the modifier as close as possible to the word(s) it modifies.

Sentence clarity is important in order to clearly convey your meaning to your reader. Clarity enables the reader to understand your intended meaning without having to guess what you meant to say. A poorly structured sentence can be vague, ambiguous, and/or nonsensical.

Nearly dead, the police finally found the victim.

The meaning of this sentence is unclear.

Who is nearly dead? The police? Or the victim?

Unfortunately, poorly structured sentences are challenging to correct, because there are many ways to correct them.

Common Structural Problems

There are three categories of common structural problems that affect sentence clarity:

1. Misplaced modifiers.
2. Dangling modifiers.
3. The improper splitting of a grammatical unit.

Before discussing these categories, let's first review what a modifier is.

A **modifier** is a word or phrase that describes, restricts, or qualifies another word or phrase. Modifiers are typically set off with commas and many begin with *which*, *who*, *that*, *whose*, and *whom*.

Modifiers should be placed as close as possible to the word(s) they modify.

Improper Placement of Modifiers

In the example that was used previously:

Nearly dead, the police finally found the victim.

Nearly dead is the modifier that is improperly placed. The reader could interpret that the police were nearly dead or that the victim was nearly dead. The modifier should have been placed closer to the word it was describing, *victim*.

Always review your sentence to confirm that your meaning is clear.

The proper placement of the modifier would be:

The police finally found the victim, who was nearly dead.

Now the sentence clearly states the intended meaning.

As is the case with most rules, there are exceptions. In this example, the general rule applies: place a modifier as close as possible to the word it describes. This rule applies most of the time. However, there are some cases where placing the modifier in the middle of the sentence actually causes confusion.

Modifiers like *only*, *frequently*, and *sometimes* can be confusing if they are placed in the middle of the sentence. When these modifiers are placed in the middle of the sentence, it is often unclear if the modifier is modifying the preceding words or the words that follow it.

You should always review your sentence to confirm that your meaning is clear.

The manager was only able to detect obvious errors in the system.

Does *only* apply to the manager?

Only the manager was able to detect the obvious errors in the system.

Or was *only* applying to errors?

The manager was able to detect only the obvious errors in the system.

Either sentence is now correct grammatically, but the intended meaning of the sentence remains unknown.

A **dangling modifier** does not refer to any particular word in the sentence.

Improper splitting of a grammatical unit occurs when a phrase is added in the middle of a grammatical unit.

Dangling Modifier Errors

A **dangling modifier** is a modifier that doesn't refer to any particular word(s) in the sentence. To correct this type of error, the sentence must be restructured.

Seeing the report, the layout was extraordinary.

Seeing the report dangles; that is, it modifies nothing in the sentence. The sentence can be restructured to read:

Seeing the report, David thought the layout was extraordinary.

Now *Seeing the report* modifies David.

Improper Splitting of a Grammatical Unit

The improper splitting of a grammatical unit occurs when a phrase is split by inserting another clause in the middle of it. This results in an awkward and confusing sentence.

The government's goal for the coming year is to provide for its elderly residents support services that maintain their independence.

The goal is *to provide support services*.

for its elderly residents has split the phrase that states the goal of the government.

The sentence should be restructured to read:

The government's goal for the coming year is to provide support services that maintain the independence of the elderly residents.

Review

Let's review the three common categories of errors that can affect sentence clarity:

1. Misplaced modifiers.
2. Dangling modifiers.
3. The improper splitting of a grammatical unit.

Return to the Graduate Success Prep Program available through the myFranklin Web site and do the exercises for this module.