USING MODIFIERS

What is a Modifier?

Modifiers are words and phrases that are added to a sentence to further describe or limit the original statement. While not necessary, they often make the sentence clearer, more specific, or more engaging for the reader. If modifiers are not clearly connected to the words that they modify, though, they will confuse the reader. This is why it's important to understand how modifiers add meaning and to place them near the words that they modify in the sentence.

Modifiers can take on multiple forms, from long dependent clauses to single words. Single words often add clarity to a description, and alongside phrases and clauses all often act like adverbs or adjectives.

> Example: I read the book.
> Adding modifiers: I **quickly** read the **first** book **on the green bookshelf**.

While the first sentence is complete, the second gives the reader much more information about *which* book is being read, *where* it is located and *how* it is being read.

Misplaced Modifiers

A misplaced modifier is closer to a noun that it does NOT modify than the one it was intended to modify, leading to confusion for the reader. This is fixed by moving the modifier closer to the noun it is supposed to modify.

> Example: **Buzzing around the room,** Seo Jun smacked down the fly.
> Reader Confusion: The fly is the one "buzzing around the room", not Seo Jun.
> Revision: Seo Jun smacked down the fly buzzing around the room.

Limiting modifiers: Limiting modifiers – almost, nearly, just, about, etc. – are often misplaced. This can be fixed by always placing them in front of the noun they limit.

> Example: The man who works the cash register where I get my seeds **occasionally** asks me about my garden.
> Reader Confusion: It is unclear whether the speaker gets seeds occasionally, or the man occasionally asks about the speaker's garden.
> Revision: The man who works the cash register where I **occasionally** get my seeds asks me about my garden.

Dangling Modifiers

A dangling modifier is a word or phrase that should modify the following word (usually a noun), but that word is missing, leading to an illogical and often confusing sentence. To fix a dangling modifier, add the missing modified word or phrase, and place the modifier next to it. Dangling modifiers are often caused by using passive voice; see our handout on Passive Voice to learn more about this.

> Example: **After reading the original study**, the flaws in Zheng's argument are obvious.
> Reader Confusion: The flaws didn't read the study, and this sentence does not tell us who that reader is.
> Revision: **After reading the original study, the research team** found that the flaws in Zheng's argument are obvious.