

Modifiers and How to Use Them

What is a modifier? A **modifier** qualifies, limits, enhances, or in some way alters the meaning of a word or other element in a sentence. Modifiers may be single words, phrases, or clauses.

Single-word modifiers are either adjectives or adverbs.

- **Adjectives** modify nouns and pronouns:
Braided sweetgrass, a sacred plant, is sometimes used in healing circles. (The underlined adjectives modify the nouns *sweetgrass* and *plant*.)
- **Adverbs** modify verbs, other adverbs, and whole word groups:
She spoke authoritatively, in a serious tone. (The adverbs modify the verb *spoke*.)

Only **adverbs** should be used to modify **verbs**, e.g., *She spoke authoritatively*. However, a modifier coming after a verb should be an adjective if it describes the **subject**:

- The eagle soared, powerful and serene against the overcast sky.

If we wanted to describe the eagle's **soaring** (the verb), rather than the eagle (the subject) itself, we'd say:

- The eagle soared powerfully and serenely against the overcast sky.

Here's an example of a commonly misunderstood modifier:

- The students felt bad about their cheating.

Here, the adjective bad describes the students' **emotional state** (noun), not the **action** (verb) of feeling; if it described the action of feeling, it would be phrased "felt badly," as in, the students did a poor-quality job of feeling. (It might seem odd that "felt" should be considered a noun in this case, but in this context it's a "linking verb.")

Misplaced Modifiers

A misplaced modifier falls in the wrong place in a sentence, causing confusion or awkwardness. Keep modifiers **near** the words they are intended to modify, in a syntactical position that supports your intended meaning, or you might end up with some very odd statements:

- *Producing green smoke, he observed the chemical reaction.*
- *They recruited subjects for their research projects that were at least 60 years old.*
- *Scholars discussed the film, drawing on Foucauldian theory, which was a box-office hit.*

Limiting Modifiers

Limiting modifiers include *only, almost, even, exactly, hardly, just, merely, nearly, and simply*. They should fall immediately before the word or word group they modify, according to meaning. They should appear in front of a verb only if they modify the verb (e.g., *I could hardly move*). If they limit the meaning of another word in the sentence, they should appear in front of that word.

- **Misleading statement:** *They only interviewed research subjects during working hours.* (They did not do anything else with research subjects during working hours.)
- **Revised:** *They interviewed research subjects only during working hours.* (Working hours are the only time they interviewed subjects.)
- **Revised:** *They interviewed only research subjects during working hours.* (They did not interview anyone else during working hours.)

Not is also frequently misplaced, suggesting a meaning the writer did not intend.

- **Unclear:** *Even after the suffrage movement, all women did not vote.* (Suggests no women voted.)
- **Revised:** *Even after the suffrage movement, not all women voted.* (Some, but not all, women voted.)

Dangling Modifiers

Dangling modifiers are word groups that don't logically modify anything in a sentence:

Reviewing the transcripts, the racism became more evident.

This modifier (Reviewing the transcripts) does not name an actor, so readers expect it is the same as the subject of the following clause (racism). Although racism cannot perform the action of reviewing transcripts, that meaning is suggested. The writer has left out the word that the modifier is intended to modify, so the modifier is unconnected to the rest of the sentence—it “dangles.”

Revise dangling modifiers by using the following strategies:

- Rewrite the dangling modifier as a complete clause with its own stated subject or verb (naming the actor in the modifier).
 - **Revised:** As we reviewed the transcripts, the racism became more evident.
- Change the subject of the sentence to a word the modifier properly describes (naming the actor in the subject).
 - **Dangling:** Trying to understand the causes, racism is being intensively studied.
 - **Revised:** Trying to understand the causes, researchers are intensively studying racism.

For more examples, see [common types of dangling modifiers](#).

Split Infinitives

Traditionally, grammar rules instructed that a modifier should not divide the two components of the infinitive form of a verb (to + verb).

- Awkward: The weather reporter advised that we could **expect it to not rain** tomorrow.
- Revised: The weather reporter advised that we could **expect it not to rain** tomorrow.

However, in some cases it is more natural to split the infinitive, as in this example from Strunk and White: “I cannot bring myself to really like the fellow.” The meaning is clear; un-splitting the infinitive would only result in an awkward construction.