

MODIFIERS

A **modifier** can be an **adjective**, an adverb, or a **phrase** or **clause** acting as an adjective or adverb. In every case, the basic principle is the same: the modifier adds information to another element in the **sentence**.

In this chapter, you will begin by working with single-word modifiers: adjectives and adverbs, but the information here will also apply to phrases and clauses which act as modifiers.

Using Adverbs and Adjectives

Adverbs are words that modify **verbs**, **adjectives**, other adverbs, and sometimes **clauses** and whole **sentences**. Adjectives are words that modify **nouns** and **pronouns**. Be careful not to use an adjective where you need an adverb. Consider the following sentences, for instance:

Once the operation was over, Shamim walked **slowly** out of the hospital.
(Incorrect)

Once the operation was over, Shamim walked **slowly** out of the hospital. (Correct)

The sentence needs an adverb, not an adjective, to modify the verb “walked”.

We tried **real** hard to get the perfect snapshot. (Incorrect)

We tried **really** hard to get the perfect snapshot. (Correct)

The sentence needs an adverb, not an adjective, to modify the adjective “hard.” (note the “really” is an informal substitute for “very”, and you should avoid in the formal essays’.) *Using “good,” “bad,” “well,” and “badly.”*

You might also note the distinctions between “good” and “bad” (which are adjectives) and “well” and “badly” (which are adverbs):

Shelley plays the sitar **well** and the veena **badly**.

The actor's performance was **good** even though he felt **bad** that night.

“well” is an adjective only when it refers to health or condition:

She protested that she was **well** enough to start playing sports again.

Using Adjectives with Linking Verbs

In the same vein, remember that adjectives modify nouns and pronouns. Do not mistakenly use an adverb to modify these **parts of speech**

For example, after a **linking verb** you may be tempted to use an adverb instead of an adjective. You will recall that the linking verb is a special kind of verb because it links its **subject** to a **subject complement**. A subject complement can be either a noun (renaming the subject) or a **modifier** (describing the subject). When it is a modifier, it must be an adjective because it describes the subject (always a noun or pronoun). It does not modify the linking verb itself and should therefore not be an adverb.

We felt **badly** about having caused the trouble (Incorrect)

We felt **bad** about having caused the trouble. (Correct)

Using Conjunctive Adverbs

The **conjunctive adverb** is a special kind of adverb that often serves as a transition between two **independent clauses** in a sentence. Some common conjunctive adverbs are “therefore,” “however,” “moreover,” “nevertheless,” “consequently,” and “furthermore.” When using a conjunctive adverb at the beginning of the second independent clause, be sure to precede it with a **semicolon** not a **comma**.

My roommate usually listens to Hindi film music; however, he also likes Jagjit Singh and several other ghazal singers.

Using the Comparative and Superlative

You should use the **comparative** form of an **adjective** or **adverb** to compare exactly two things. You can form the comparative by adding the **suffix “er”** to the modifier (for some short words) or by using the word “more” with the **modifier**:

Of the two designs, the fashion designer is convinced that the panel will select the **more experimental** one. (Comparing two designs)

Now that it is December, the days are getting **shorter**. (Longer now than before)

You should use the **superlative** form to compare three or more things. You can form the superlative by adding the suffix “est” to the modifier (for some short words) or by using the word “most” with the modifier:

This is definitely the **smartest, wittiest, most imaginative** advertisement strip I have ever seen. (Implying that I have seen more than two)

Common Problems with the Comparative and Superlative

There are certain modifiers which you cannot logically use in the comparative and superlative forms. Adjectives like “perfect” and “unique,” for instance, express absolute conditions and do not allow for degrees of comparison. Something cannot be more perfect than another thing: it is either perfect or not perfect.

You should also avoid using a **double comparison** that is, using both a suffix and an adverb to indicate the comparative or superlative:

I am convinced that my son is **more smarter** than your son. (Incorrect)

Laurel and Hardy are the **most funniest** comedians in children film history. (Incorrect)

I am convinced that my son is **smarter** than your son. (Correct)

Laurel and Hardy are the **funniest** comedians in children film history. (Correct)

Similarly, although the **double negative** the use of two negative words together for a single negative idea is common in speech and has a long history in the English language, you should avoid using it in formal writing:

We decided there **wasn't no** point in pursuing the matter further. (Incorrect)

I can't get no satisfaction. (Incorrect)

We decided there **wasn't any** point in pursuing the matter further. (Correct)

I can't get any satisfaction. *OR I can get no* satisfaction. (Correct)

Double negatives involving “not” and “no” are fairly easy to spot and fix. However, some other adverbs for example, “hardly,” “scarcely,” “barely” *imply* the negative, and you should not use them with another negative:

Even though he has lived in Mumbai for four years, he **does not have hardly any** friends there. (Incorrect)

Even though he has lived in Mumbai for four years, he **has hardly any** friends there. *OR* Even though he has lived in Mumbai for four years, he **does not have many** friends there. (Correct)

Adverbs and Adjectives

Choose the correct word in each of the following sentences.

1. Many people have tried to sell us air conditioners, but you are certainly one of the -----salespeople we have met.
 - a. More convincing
 - b. Most convincing

2. The sound quality of this film is poor, and the picture is focused-----
-----as well.
- bad
 - badly
3. My brother's roommate this year is -----than the graduate student he lived with last year.
- Louder
 - Loudest
 - More louder
4. That Lady dresses-----and knows what would suit her best.
- Smart
 - Smartly
5. She is-----prompt at making policy decisions.
- Real
 - Really
6. Sunita followed the recipe closely, but the cake smelled-----after twenty minutes in the oven.
- Strangely
 - Strange
7. Her husband draws so -----that he has been asked to submit sketches to an ad agency.
- Good
 - Well

8. She felt-----about the whole incident for weeks afterward.
- Badly
 - Bad

Misplaces and Dangling Modifiers

You have a certain amount of freedom in deciding where to place your modifiers in a sentence:

We rowed the boat **vigorously**.

We **vigorously** rowed the boat.

Vigorously we rowed the boat.

However, you must be careful to avoid **misplaced modifiers** ----modifiers that are positioned such that they appear to modify the wrong thing.

In fact, you can improve your writing quite a bit by paying attention to basic problems like misplaced modifiers and dangling modifiers.

Misplaced Words

In general, you should place single-word modifiers near the word or words they modify, especially when a reader might think that they modify something different in the sentence, Consider the following sentence:

After our short discussion, we could understand the rules spoken by our visitors from the Mumbai office **easily** (Incorrect)

After our short discussion, we could **easily** understand the rules spoken by our visitors from the Mumbai office. (Correct)

It is particularly important to be careful about where you put **limiting modifiers**. These are words like “almost,” “hardly,” “nearly,” “just,” “only,” “merely,” and so on. Many writers regularly misplace these modifiers. You can accidentally change the entire meaning of a sentence if you place these modifiers next to the wrong word:

We **almost** ate all of the Diwali sweets. (Correct)

Misplaced Phrases and Clauses

It is important that you place the modifying **Phrase** of **clause** as close as possible to the word or words it modifies:

By accident, he hit the little girl with his stick **in the eye**. (Incorrect)

After the wedding, Suman told us at his party that he would start behaving like a responsible adult. (Incorrect)

By accident, he hit the little girl **in the eye** with his stick. (Correct)

Suman told us at his party that he would start behaving like a responsible adult **after the wedding**. (Correct)

Squinting Modifiers

A **squinting modifier** is an ambiguously placed modifier that can modify either the word before it or the word after it. In other words, it is “squinting” in both directions at the same time:

Defining your terms **clearly** strengthens your argument. (does defining “clearly strengthen” or does “defining clearly” strengthen?) (Incorrect)

Defining your terms **will clearly** strengthen your argument. *OR A clear definition* of your terms strengthens your argument. (Correct)

Split Infinitives

The **infinitive** form of the verb consists of the word “to” followed by the base form of the verb: “to be,” “to serve,” “to chop,” etc. inserting a word or words between the “to” and the verb of an infinitive creates what is known as a **split infinitive**.

In general, you should avoid placing long, disruptive modifiers between the ‘to’ and the verb of an infinitive. However, you must use your judgments when it comes to single-word modifiers. Sometimes a sentence becomes awkward if a single-word modifier is placed anywhere but between the elements of the infinitive.

The marketing team voted to, before they launched the new software, runs an anticipatory ad campaign. (disruptive--- the infinitive should not be split) (Incorrect)

The marketing team voted to run an anticipatory ad campaign **before they launched the new software**. (Correct)

Dangling Modifiers

The **dangling modifier**, a persistent and frequent grammatical problem in writing, is often (though not always) located at the beginning of a sentence. A dangling modifier is usually a phrase or an **elliptical clause**—a **dependent clause** whose **subject** and verb are implied rather than expressed—that functions as an **adjective** but does not modify any specific word in the sentence, or (worse) modifies the wrong word. Consider the following example:

Raised in Mangalore, it is natural to miss the smell of the sea. The introductory phrase in the above sentence looks as if it is meant to modify a person

or persons, but no one is mentioned in the sentence. Such introductory **adjective phrases**, because of their position, automatically modify the first **noun** or **pronoun** that follows the phrase—in this case, “it”. The connection in this case is illogical because “it” was not raised in Mangalore. You could revise the sentence in a number of ways:

For a person raised in Mangalore, it is natural to miss the smell of the sea.
(the phrase no longer functions as an adjective)

Raised in Mangalore, **I** often miss the smell of the sea. (the phrase functions as an adjective but now automatically modifies “I,” a logical connection)

A dangling modifier can also appear when you place an **elliptical clause** improperly:

Although nearly finished, we left the show early because we were worried about children left alone in the house.

The way this sentence is structured, the clause “Although nearly finished” illogically modifies “we,” the pronoun directly following the clause. An easy way to rectify the problem is to re-insert the subject and verb that are understood in the elliptical clause:

Al though **the show** was nearly finished, we left early because we were worried about children left alone in the house.

Misplaced and Dangling Modifiers

Indicate whether each sentence does or does not contain a misplaced modifier or a dangling modifier.

1. Flashing a huge grin, Roshan apologized for being late and then handed his grandmother a bouquet of flowers.
2. The surgeon was able to quickly and painlessly remove the stitches from my palm.

3. After gathering flowers all summer and pressing them between the pages of a heavy book, the dried petals were ready for Namita to make greeting cards to sell at the fair.
4. We had almost watched the entire movie when suddenly the person behind us blurted out, “The nurse did it!”
5. Before buying a new stereo, you should carefully consider what you need and what you can afford.
6. I heard that he got married to a princess with a vast fortune in a small temple in Rajasthan.
7. Covered with bowls of strawberries, plates of bread and cheese, trays of squares and cookies, and huge frosted cakes, the Vishal banquet hall had organized a magnificent tea.
8. After borrowing from all his friends, he had barely enough money to pay his rent.
9. To succeed in the engineering field, some technical writing ability is definite asset.
10. My best friend is starting a weight-gaining regime in two weeks of five meals a day.

Fixing Misplaced Modifiers

Rewrite each sentence to eliminate misplaced modifiers.

1. Running quickly gives her a headache.
2. Although tired, the sale was so good that we shopped until nine.
3. Raging and blowing from the north, we had a terrible blizzard on Saturday.
4. I gave my niece a photo of her golden retriever in a silver frame.
5. To be considered by the top firms, your resume must look professional.

