

MODIFIERS

Defining Modifiers

A modifier adds to or changes the meaning of a word in a sentence:

My cat was stretched out before the fireplace.

My **orange-striped** cat was stretched out **lazily** before the **glowing** fireplace.

The underlined words modify, or enhance the meaning of "cat", "stretched out", and "fireplace." There is no confusion about which words modify what. "Orange-striped" and "glowing" are acting as adjectives, modifying nouns. "Lazily" is an adverb modifying the verb phrase "was stretched out."

Sometimes the modifier is a group of words, not just an adjective or an adverb:

My cat, **who is striped with orange**, stretched **in a lazy yawn** before the glowing fireplace.

Again, there is no confusion here: the clause "who is striped with orange" clearly modifies "cat" and the phrase "in a lazy yawn" clearly modifies the verb "stretched."

Misplacing Modifiers

However, when modifiers are NOT clearly positioned in a sentence, ridiculous confusion may result:

Stretching lazily, the glowing fireplace attracted my cat with orange stripes.

What's stretching--the cat or the fireplace? It's easy to see how this kind of confusion arises: the writer tries to pack some interest and imagery into the sentence, but doesn't notice where the phrases and clauses are being placed. The **writer** may be perfectly clear about which words modify which, but the **reader** isn't always. When sentences begin with words ending in -ing, those words often cause confusion when they turn out **not** to describe the first noun that follows them. Any modifier that opens a sentence must be immediately followed by the noun it modifies:

Stretching lazily, **my cat** with orange stripes lay before the glowing fireplace.

Other kinds of confusion occur when a modifier somewhere later in a sentence could describe either of two possible nouns:

He talked about the hours he spent trapped under the rubble after his rescue.

Did he talk after his rescue or was he still trapped after his rescue? The second possibility is unlikely, but since "rescue" is closer to "trapped" than to "talked," many readers will have to stop and read this sentence again. Why frustrate them?

After his rescue, he talked about the hours he had spent trapped under the rubble.

Practice

Find any modifiers in the following sentences that are misplaced or unclear and rewrite each sentence to eliminate any problems.

1. Having eaten lunch, the tables were cleared.
2. I have a great picture of my aunt and her date wearing her prom dress.
3. I have a list of the people who danced on the table.
4. Browsing among the gifts for sale, my grandmother's words came to me.
5. Barking and leaping, I watched Bingo tear around the fence.
6. My dog is a Golden Retriever with a purple collar weighing 78 pounds.
7. I got instructions on how to make a centerpiece from a fourth-grader.
8. The exercises I did often left me feeling sore.
9. With a glance in my rear-view mirror, the car shot ahead.
10. He promised to fix the leak at the supermarket.

Possible Correct Answers

1. (The tables didn't eat). When everyone had eaten lunch, the tables were cleared.
2. (Who's wearing the dress?) I have a great picture of my aunt in her prom dress, standing next to her date.
3. (Was the list on the table or did the people dance on the table?) I have a list on the table of the people who danced.
4. (The words didn't browse). Browsing among the gifts for sale, I remembered my grandmother's word.
5. (I don't bark--usually). Barking and leaping, Bingo tore around the fence as I watched.
6. (That's one heavy collar). My dog is a 78-pound Golden Retriever with a purple collar.
7. (Did I have to put glitter on the kid or just color and fold her?) I got instructions from a fourth-grader on how to make a centerpiece.
8. (Did I do the exercises often or did they hurt often?) The exercises I did daily sometimes left me feeling sore.
9. (The car didn't glance). With a glance in my rear-view mirror, I hit the gas and the car shot ahead.
10. (Did he promise to repair the supermarket, or was he at the supermarket when he promised to fix the leak at home?) When we were at the supermarket, he promised to fix the leak in the kitchen ceiling.