MANAGING MODIFIERS

Modifiers describe or give more information about nouns or verbs. Modifiers are often adjectives or adverbs, but they can also be longer phrases or clauses that act as adjectives or adverbs.

As adjectives added to nouns, modifiers give details about people, places, and things. As adverbs added to verbs, they tell us why, when, where, how, or under what conditions something happens. They are not grammatically necessary, but modifiers can add a great deal to the meaning of a sentence.

Adding Modifiers to a Sentence

A sentence may be grammatically complete but short on details.

e.g., Jean Chrétien pushed a protestor.

Details that are missing:
What was the timeframe? Where did this happen? What led to the altercation? What was being protested?

You can improve the sentence by adding several modifiers.

e.g., In 1996, during a ceremony to commemorate the first National Flag Day of Canada, Jean Chrétien, the Prime Minister, violently pushed a protestor to the ground, an incident which many young voters remembered at the next election.

Avoiding Misplaced Modifiers

A misplaced modifier refers to a word or group of words placed so far away from what it modifies that confusion arises, as in the examples below:

e.g., Please join us for a discussion of human trafficking at Conestoga College.

It is unclear whether the author is claiming that human trafficking is occurring at the college or that the discussion will take place at the college.

e.g., When students returned from the Christmas break, they were told that their valuables had been stolen by campus police.

It is unclear whether the author is claiming that campus police stole the valuables or that campus police told the students about the thefts.
To avoid confusion, you need to place modifiers **as close as possible to the words they modify.** This advice applies particularly to one-word modifiers (only, nearly, almost, etc.) as seen in the difference in the meaning of the following sentences.

*e.g.,* The bylaw only stipulates that registered students can use the new athletic centre.

   The writer could mean that the bylaw only stipulates who can use the new facilities but doesn't provide any ways to enforce the policy.

*e.g.,* The bylaw stipulates only that registered students can use the new athletic centre.

   The writer could mean that the new bylaw stipulates only one thing and says nothing else.

*e.g.,* The bylaw stipulates that only registered students can use the new athletic centre.

   The writer probably intended to explain that the use of the new facilities is restricted only to students.

**Avoiding Dangling Modifiers**

*Dangling modifiers* are words or groups of words that refer to someone or something that is not actually in the sentence. As a result, they appear to modify the wrong things, resulting in sometimes embarrassing confusion:

*e.g.,* My parents were expecting their third child at the age of eight.

   This suggests that the parents expected the child when they were eight years old.

*e.g.,* Jogging past the Tatham Centre, the Dana Porter Library loomed into view.

   This suggests that the library jogged past the Tatham Centre.

The sentences can easily be corrected by including the people to whom the author indirectly refers:

*e.g.,* When I was eight, my parents were expecting their third child.

*e.g.,* While jogging past the Tatham Centre, I saw the Dana Porter Library loom into view.