

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.