

Dangling Modifiers

Explanation

All **modifiers**, words that add clarify, describe, or add detail to other words in a sentence, must be clearly and logically connected to their **implied subjects**, the grammatical subject of the clause nearest to the modifier. For example, in the following sentences we can easily connect the underlined modifiers with their implied subjects, which are underlined twice.

- Happy with her new hula hoop, the young girl skipped down the street.
- Invigorated by the sunny weather, we decided to go on a picnic in Golden Gate Park.
- Before buying a hybrid car, my brother used to ride a motorcycle.

...connections...

See also the
“Identifying Verbs &
Subjects” and
“Adjectives &
Adverbs” handouts.

But sometimes, when writers use modifiers carelessly, their implied subjects are illogical. For example:

- In examining his argument closely, the point at which he went wrong can be seen.
- To network more effectively, Scientology is practiced by many actors.
- Polite and respectful, the visiting teacher was impressed with the children’s manners.

The way the first two sentences are written, they imply that the *point* somehow examined his argument and that *Scientology* is trying to network more effectively—neither of these ideas make any sense. The third sentence, while not as obviously illogical, suggests that the visiting teacher was polite and respectful, not the children—almost certainly not what the writer intends.

Misleading or illogical constructions like these are called **dangling modifiers**. Dangling modifiers most often come at the beginning of a sentence, as in the examples above, but they can also come at the end of a sentence.

- Attendance was stressed by my English teacher, taking off points for late arrivals and early departures.

The way this sentence is written, it implies that *attendance* takes points off for late arrivals and early departures—an illogical statement.

Fixing Dangling Modifiers

In order to fix a dangling modifier, you need to revise your sentence so that the implied subject makes sense. You can do this by asking yourself “*who is logically doing the action of the modifier*”? For example:

| Original Sentence | Revised Sentence |
|--|--|
| <p><u>In examining his argument closely</u>, the <u>point</u> at which he went wrong can be seen.</p> | <p><i>Who is examining his argument?</i> <u>we</u></p> <p><u>In examining his argument closely</u>, <u>we</u> can see the point at which he went wrong.</p> |
| <p><u>To network more effectively</u>, <u>Scientology</u> is practiced by many actors.</p> | <p><i>Who is trying to network more effectively?</i> <u>actors</u></p> <p><u>To network more effectively</u>, many <u>actors</u> practice Scientology.</p> |
| <p><u>Polite and respectful</u>, the visiting teacher was impressed with the children’s manners.</p> | <p><i>Who is polite and respectful?</i> <u>the children</u></p> <p><u>Polite and respectful</u>, <u>the children</u> impressed the visiting teacher with their manners.</p> |
| <p>In my English class, <u>attendance</u> was stressed, <u>taking off points for late arrivals and early departures</u>.</p> | <p><i>Who stresses attendance?</i> the <u>teacher</u></p> <p>In my English class, the <u>teacher</u> stressed attendance, <u>taking off points for late arrivals and early departures</u>.</p> |

Exercises

Read each sentence, underlining the introductory modifier and double-underlining the implied subject. Does the modifier logically connect with the implied subject? If the implied subject does not make sense, revise the sentence.

For example: Thought to have originated the Indian Subcontinent, Eastern Europe is now home to many Roma, better known as gypsies.

(Is Eastern Europe thought to have originated in India? No, the Roma are, so we need to revise this sentence.)

Revised: Thought to have originated the Indian Subcontinent, many Roma, better known as gypsies, now live in Eastern Europe.

1. Reacting with suspicion and hostility to the Roma's distinct culture and nomadic lifestyles, they have historically been discriminated against by some native Europeans.
2. Taken to the extreme, persecution included enslavement and executions.
3. Known as the *Porajmos*, or the "devouring," in World War Two the Nazis carried out an attempted genocide that killed between 200,000 and 800,000 Roma.
4. Derogatory stereotypes are still perpetuated, characterizing the Roma as tramps and thieves.
5. Both embodying and transcending the sadness of this history, an important expression of traditional Rom culture is music.
6. Developed in Spanish Roma communities, the outside world is probably most familiar with flamenco music.
7. Brought to the Americas, Roma music has contributed to Cuban salsa, mambo, rumba and guajira music: Mexican mariachi music; and even American country music.
8. A celebration of the range and vitality of gypsy music, the Roma director Tony Gatlif made the excellent documentary *Latcho Drom*.