Dangling Modifiers

A modifier is a word, phrase or clause that adds description to a target idea. A **dangling modifier** occurs when a modifier is not clearly targeting the idea.

Examples of Dangling Modifiers

A dangling modifier can crop up in two ways. The first is when there is not a subject for the modifier to describe.

*Example: Hungry, the leftover pizza was devoured.*

“hungry” = modifier

Who devoured the pizza? This sentence doesn’t tell us, so there is no one for “hungry” to describe.

The second way a dangling modifier occurs is when the modifier is distant or incorrectly placed and appears to modify the wrong noun.

*Example: They saw a fence behind the house made of barbed wire.*

“made of barbed wire” = modifier

The way this sentence is structured, the modifier seems to be targeting the house. However, logic says the fence should be the subject that is “made of barbed wire”.

Correcting Dangling Modifiers

To correct a dangling modifier, the writer should first **identify** and **include** a logical subject.

*Example: Hungry, I devoured the leftover pizza.*

Here, we added the subject “I” to clarify who ate the pizza.

If the subject is already there, the writer should put the modifier closer to what it is modifying.

*Example: They saw a fence made of barbed wire behind the house.*

By placing the modifier “made of barbed wire” right after the word it is meant to describe (“fence”), the meaning of the sentence is more clear.
Conclusion

Sometimes as writers work on a first draft or have in their mind exactly what they mean to say, it can be easy to inadvertently put a modifier in an unclear position in the sentence. Rereading a draft aloud can help to catch misplaced modifiers, and so can getting a friend or Writing Center tutor to read your draft.