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The Hamilton College Writing Center presents

THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS OF WRITING

The Fifth Deadly Sin: Misplaced and Dangling Modifiers

Misplaced and dangling modifiers create illogical, even comical, sentences. We confuse our readers if we fail to connect modifiers (words that describe or limit other words) to the words they modify; be sure to place modifiers next to the words they modify.

See the illogic in this example: Walking back from the village, my wallet was lost.
(*Does your wallet walk?*)

Revised: Walking back from the village, I lost my wallet. (*Your wallet doesn't walk, but you do.*)

A MISPLACED MODIFIER is a word or phrase that due to its placement mistakenly refers to the wrong word. The modifier truly is misplaced.

To correct a misplaced modifier, move it next to or near the word it modifies: A fine athlete and student, the coach honored the captain of the tennis team.
(*The coach was not the fine athlete and student.*)

Revised: The coach honored the captain of the tennis team, who was a fine athlete and student.

A LIMITING MODIFIER (e.g., *only, almost, nearly, just*) is commonly misplaced.

To avoid ambiguity, place the limiting modifier in front of the word it explains: Marsh's evidence reinforces the view that the artist only intended the images for a local audience.

Revised: Marsh's evidence reinforces the view that the artist intended the images *only* for a local audience.

A DANGLING MODIFIER is a (usually introductory) word or phrase that the writer intends to modify a following word, but the following word is missing. The result is an illogical statement.

To fix a dangling modifier, add the missing word and place the modifier next to it: Acting on numerous complaints from students, a fox was found on campus.
(*The fox did not act on the complaint.*)

Revised: Acting on numerous complaints from students, security found a fox on campus.

After reading the original study, the flaws in Lee's argument are obvious.

Revised: Reading the original study reveals obvious flaws in Lee's argument.

Dangling modifiers go hand-in-hand with wordiness and passive voice. Correct one and you correct them all!

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