Modifiers are exactly what they sound like, a word or phrase that modifies or changes something else. To avoid this error, try to place the modifier as close as possible to the word or phrase it is modifying.

**Dangling modifiers**

Dangling modifiers have no word in the sentence that it can sensibly modify. They just dangle there, with no logical connection. To correct them, add a specific noun or pronoun. Sometimes, a person has to reword the sentence to get a clearer meaning.

*Examples of dangling modifiers:*

a) After eating our lunch, the steamboat departed.

   *(the steamboat cannot eat their lunch)*

   **Correct:** After eating our lunch, we departed on the steamboat.

b) Walking up to the house, the clouds above darkened and began to swirl.

   *(clouds cannot approach a house by walking)*

   **Correct:** As we were walking up to the house, the clouds darkened and began to swirl

**Squinting modifiers (two-way modifiers)**

Sometimes, modifiers are caught between two different objects to modify. These are commonly called ‘squinting modifiers’ because they need to squint in order to see which object they are to be associated with. Squinting modifiers are also incorrect, because they leave the reader confused about the writer’s intended meaning.

*Example of a squinting modifier:*

Children who laugh rarely are shy.

As written, that sentence could mean two different things: children who rarely laugh are shy, or children who laugh are rarely shy. In the original sentence *(Children who laugh rarely are shy)* the word rarely is squinting between the words laugh and are shy.

*(Fogarty, 2009)*
Misplaced modifiers

When modifiers are misplaced, they can confuse or even amuse the reader. Usually, the targeted noun is in the sentence, but another noun or pronoun is causing confusion. These sentences can be misleading and often entertaining. Correct a misplaced modifier by placing it directly beside the word it is modifying.

Examples of misplaced modifiers:

a) They were surprised to see a patch of ripe blueberries coming down the hill.
   *(Were the blueberries coming down the hill?)*

   **Correct:** Coming down the hill, they were surprised to see a patch of ripe blueberries.

b) Two sentences with very different meanings caused by differently placed modifiers:

   I almost failed every class I took.

   I failed almost every class I took.

   The first sentence *(I almost failed every class I took)* means that although it was close, I passed all those classes.

   The second sentence *(I failed almost every class I took)* means that I passed only a few classes. *(Fogarty, 2009)*
Practice

Review the following sentences and decide whether they contain a **dangling**, **squinting**, or **misplaced** modifier, or if they are **correct** already. If necessary, correct the mistakes in the sentences.

1) The small girl hugged and petted the cat in tears

2) Having forgotten to pick me up twice this week, I’m quitting Jim’s car pool.

3) Convicted of assault with a weapon, the offender received a six-month sentence in prison from the judge.

4) As a college English teacher, dangling modifier errors upset me.

5) Writers who revise often recognize their mistakes.

6) “He was a hero at his last police station. He once shot a robber with a Kalashnikov.”

7) The lion leapt towards the trainer in a rage.

Here’s a classic: Abraham Lincoln wrote the Gettysburg address while travelling from Washington to Gettysburg on the back of an envelope.