

Dangling Modifiers

Getting in a muddle with **dangling modifiers**?

If anything is true about English grammar, it's that changing the order of a sentence – even just two words – can drastically alter the meaning. See if you can spot what's wrong with the following sentence:

Early men hunted mammoths armed with spears.

We know what the writer meant – that early humans used spears to hunt mammoths – but the way that this sentence is ordered makes it sound as though it is mammoths who were armed with spears.

Better, clearer word orders for this sentence would be:

Armed with spears, early men hunted mammoths.

Early men armed themselves with spears to hunt mammoths.

Such misunderstandings arise from what is known as **dangling** or **misplaced modifiers**.

More examples where dangling modifiers lead to confusion:

*I found my missing hat **cleaning my room**.*

*I saw lots of horses **on holiday in Spain**.*

In this case, these sentences are missing the word *while*, with the result that it sounds as though the hat was cleaning the room and the horses were on holiday in Spain. In these sentences, **the modifier is meant to refer to the subject I**. Adding *while* clarifies the situation:

I found my missing hat while cleaning my room.

I saw lots of horses while on holiday in Spain.

How to avoid dangling modifiers:

1. **Read the sentence out loud.** This helps you quickly spot any ambiguity or unintended meaning caused by a misplaced modifier.
2. **Reorganize the sentence structure** so that the descriptive phrase (modifier) is placed directly next to the subject it's meant to describe (e.g. *Early men...*).
3. **Use linking words** such as *while* or *as* to make the connection between the modifier and the subject more explicit.
4. Finally, **read your revised sentence out loud again** to check that it clearly conveys your intended meaning.

Modifier (n.) = a word/phrase that adds information, description, or detail to another word, phrase, or clause.

If it is unclear what the modifier is referring to – it's a dangling modifier!