

RP 5: Modifiers & Adj/Adv Mixups

1. Dangling and misplaced participles

Present participles are words like *colliding*, *writing*, and *jumping* when they are used in verb phrases like *was jumping* or as adjectives as in *the jumping fish*. Past participles are words like *collided*, *written*, and *fought* when they are used in verb phrases like *had written* or used as adjectives in phrases like *the written language*.

A participial phrase is a phrase that includes a participle but not a subject. It is usually separated from the main clause of the sentence by one or more commas. Participial phrases should be right before or right after their subject.

Eating ravenously, the vultures remained on the carcass until it was picked clean.

The runners, exhausted from the final sprint, stumbled through the finish line.

When you read a participial phrase, make sure you know what it is supposed to be modifying. For example, when you read the first sentence above, you should ask yourself, “Who or what was *eating ravenously*?” If instead of *the vultures*, another noun appeared after the participial phrase, you might see a **dangling modifier** error:

Eating ravenously, the carcass was picked clean by the remaining vultures.

Exhausted from the final sprint, the finish line was stumbled through by the runners.

After having studied all night, the professor postponed the test until Friday.

See the dangling modifiers in the three sentences above? The first two may be easy to spot because the sentences also contain weak passive voice constructions, but the last sentence is wrong, too. When you ask yourself, “Who *studied all night*?” common sense tells you that it could not have been *the professor*. Consider these fixes:

After having studied all night, I learned that the professor had postponed the test until Friday.

After I had studied all night, the professor postponed the test until Friday.

Both of the above options are improvements. In the first sentence, we inserted a subject in the main clause—but this change alters the emphasis of the sentence: the whole sentence is about what *I* did. In the second sentence, we inserted a subject in the modifier, giving us one dependent clause in which *I* am the emphasized subject and one main clause in which *the professor* is the emphasized subject. Maybe we can make the sentence even clearer:

After having studied all night, I was frustrated to learn that our test had been postponed until Friday.

There are two ways to fix **dangling modifiers**: naming the subject in the main clause and naming the subject in the modifier (turning the modifier into a clause). **Misplaced modifiers**, however, are fixed by moving around words.

Bob found his watch walking to the bathroom.

Whoops—Bob’s watch wasn’t walking! If we ask, “Who or what was *walking*?” we can see that the phrase *walking to the bathroom* ought to be placed near *Bob* (or a pronoun that refers to him). Consider these fixes:

Walking to the bathroom, Bob found his watch.

Bob found his watch as he was walking to the bathroom.

How would you fix this sentence?

It was difficult for William to hear the announcements waiting for the train.

Were the *announcements* waiting for the train? Of course not. Here are two good fixes:

While waiting for the train, William found it difficult to hear the announcements.

William found it difficult to hear the announcements while he was waiting for the train.

My example (sentence with a dangling/misplaced modifier):

Dangling and misplaced participles practice

Circle the participle and its subject and draw an arrow between them. Then rewrite to fix any problems you find.

1. *Looking at your essay, it seems to me that you need to use more specific examples.*
2. *Turning the corner, the stadium came into my view.*
3. *Although exhausted after the night’s work, Martha’s creative instincts compelled her to keep writing.*

4. Without waiting for an answer, David's eagerness got the better of him and he rushed out the door.
5. Thinking her friends were right behind her, it was frightening for Alison to discover that they were gone.
6. Although angered by the irrationality of his opponent, Senator Sanchez's plan was to address each point calmly.
7. Watching from the bridge, the fireworks bloomed spectacularly over the water.
8. Exhausted from the day's climbing, the looming storm forced the hikers to pitch an early camp.
9. Having studied for hours, it was very disappointing that I did so poorly on the exam.
10. Without being aware of it, termites can infest your home if you don't take the proper precautions.
11. Before getting the job at the bank, no one thought I could hold such a responsible position.
12. Lacking any real sailing skills, David's concern was mainly with keeping the ship afloat.

2. Other kinds of misplaced modifiers

Remember that every modifier should be right before or right after the word(s) it modifies.

2-1. Misplaced prepositional phrases

A **prepositional phrase** is a preposition and the noun phrase that follows. Prepositional phrases can be adjectival, meaning they modify nouns, or adverbial, meaning they modify verbs, adjectives, or adverbs.

The dog in the car was barking.

David walked into the pole.

In the first sentence, the prepositional phrase *in the car* modifies the noun *dog*, so it is an adjective phrase. In the second sentence, the prepositional phrase *into the pole* modifies the verb *walked*, so it is an adverbial phrase.

In an emergency, I am amazed at how calm Juanita can be.

This sentence suggests that I am only *amazed* in an emergency. What the author really means, however, is that Juanita is *calm* in an emergency. To clarify this intended meaning, move the prepositional phrase *in an emergency* closer to the verb it modifies:

I am amazed at how calm Juanita can be in an emergency.

2-2. Misplaced appositives

An **appositive** is a noun phrase that explains an adjacent noun, and is often set off by a comma or commas.

Franklin, the only one of us who owned a car, agreed to drive us all to the game.

The underlined noun phrase is an appositive that explains who *Franklin* is. Like any modifier, an appositive can be misplaced.

A splendid example of Synthetic Cubism, Picasso painted Three Musicians in the summer of 1924.

The phrase *a splendid example of Synthetic Cubism* is a misplaced appositive. *Picasso* is not an example of Synthetic Cubism; the painting is. Here are two acceptable fixes:

A splendid example of Synthetic Cubism, Three Musicians was painted by Picasso in the summer of 1924.

Picasso painted Three Musicians, a splendid example of Synthetic Cubism, in the summer of 1924.

2-3. Misplaced infinitives

Infinitives are phrases like *to run*, *to think*, and *to believe* that are often used as nouns. However, they are also sometimes used as modifiers, and so can be misplaced.

We have many more math problems to do.

We are working to earn money for the trip.

In the first sentence, the infinitive *to do* modifies the noun *problems*, so it is an adjective phrase. In the second sentence, the infinitive *to earn* modifies the verb *are working*, so it is an adverbial phrase.

To get our attention, we saw Mr. Genovese take out a giant boa constrictor.

The infinitive *to get* logically modifies the verb *take*. It answers the question, *why did he take it out?* But it is incorrectly placed closer to a different verb, *saw*. Here are two good fixes:

To get our attention, Mr. Genovese took out a giant boa constrictor.

We saw Mr. Genovese take out a giant boa constrictor to get our attention.

Misplaced modifiers practice

In each of the following sentences, underline and label all participial phrases (PART), prepositional phrases (PREP), appositives (APP), and infinitive phrases (INF), and rewrite any sentence to fix any misplaced modifiers.

1. *Without so much as a blink, the gleaming sword was unsheathed by the warrior.*
2. *To maintain good health, physicians suggest that both vigorous exercise and good eating habits are required.*
3. *We found my lost earring walking through the parking lot.*
4. *Having run for over four hours, the finish line was still 10 miles ahead of her.*
5. *Even with a sprained ankle, the coach forced Adam back into the game.*
6. *To find a good restaurant, there are many good online guides to help you.*
7. *In search of a good calculator, not a single store in the mall could help me.*
8. *A dutiful wife and mother, we were surprised to hear Carol complaining about domestic life.*
9. *To get a good jump out of the starting blocks, most sprinters say that good body positioning is essential.*
10. *Among the most sought-after collectibles on the market, we found the antique toys at a garage sale.*

3. Confusing adjectives and adverbs

Adjectives only modify nouns. *Adverbs* modify verbs, adjectives, and other adverbs. Don't mix up these modifiers.

I was impressed by how cogent his argument was presented.

The modifier *cogent* is intended to answer the question “[H]ow was his argument presented?” In other words, we need the adverbial form *cogently* to modify the verb *was presented*.

I was impressed by how cogently his argument was presented.

Some modifiers can be used as either adjectives or adverbs. For instance, *fast* and *well* can be used either way. In the phrase *the fast car*, the word *fast* is used as an adjective modifying the noun *car*. But in the clause *he ran fast*, the same word is an adverb modifying the verb *ran*. In the clause *I haven't been well lately*, the word *well* is an adjective meaning *healthy* modifying the pronoun *I*. But in the clause *she sings very well*, it is an adverb modifying the verb *sings*.

I couldn't write fast enough to finish the essay on time.

I feel pretty good.

Both of the above sentences are correct. The word *fast* is an adverb meaning *quickly* and it modifies the verb *write*. (*Fast* is an adjective **or** an adverb, depending on context.) The word *good* is an adjective modifying the pronoun *I*, joined to it by the linking verb *feel*. (If you say *I feel well*, the word *well* becomes an adjective meaning *healthy*.)

4. Comparative adjectives and adverbs

Remember that the comparative form is only used when comparing **TWO** things. Be careful to avoid redundant comparative constructions such as *more better*.

The briefcase feels more light than it did this morning.

The phrase *more light* is in the incorrect comparative form.

The briefcase feels lighter than it did this morning.

Please try to hold the baby gentler next time.

The word *gentler* is a comparative adjective, not a comparative **adverb**. Most comparative adverbs use *more*.

Please try to hold the baby more gently next time.

Some modifiers are absolute and can not be used in comparative or superlative form. For example, something can't be *more unique* because *unique* already means *one of a kind*. Likewise, you can't describe something as *somewhat unique*.

The loss was made more inevitable by the injury to our starting pitcher.

The concept of inevitability doesn't come in degrees. Something is either *inevitable* or it's not. There is no in between, so the phrase *more inevitable* is illogical. *The loss was made inevitable by the injury to our starting pitcher*.

5. Redundancy

The SAT will occasionally test you on redundancy—usually in the Improving Sentences section. Sometimes you’ll find unnecessary words, like *down* in the (incorrect) phrase *following down a path*. Or you may find modifiers that repeat a meaning an already-established meaning—like *enormously* in the phrase *enormously huge* or like this:

With only seconds remaining to go in the game, Michael sped quickly down the court.

Since *remaining* means roughly the same as *to go*, we don’t need to say both. Also, *to speed* means to *move quickly*, so *sped quickly* is redundant. Eliminate the redundancies:

With only seconds remaining in the game, Michael sped down the court.

More modifier practice

1. **Cross out any redundant words or phrases** in the paragraph below. (Hint: There are at least 10 redundancies.)

When we refer back to past history, we can see that whenever a new innovation is introduced for the first time, people rarely accept the whole entire concept, at least not right away. If and when something threatens the ways of the past, people don’t easily accept this new concept. Although not everyone necessarily needs to maintain the status quo, consistency and predictability make people feel comfortable. Even when technology comes up with a way to do things better, people often continue on with their (older, less efficient ways. For instance, it’s not uncommon for people to use e-mail while at the same time continuing to correspond through “snail mail.” If they would quickly pause for a moment, they would see that they can communicate more effectively through the Internet-and save some trees!

Correct any modifier problems in the sentences below.

- The latest political commercials make their points stronger than previous ones.*
- My shirt smelled quite foully after rugby practice.*
- We never usually get to go to such elegant restaurants.*
- Although both of my parents are level-headed, my father is the most patient.*
- The third graders weren’t hardly interested in going to the museum after school.*
- I can sing in front of a crowd easier than I can give a speech.*
- In many areas of the country, wind energy can be converted to electricity even more efficient than can fossil energy.*
- I felt surprisingly good after Saturday’s 10-mile run.*
- The microscopic size of the fracture made it more impossible to detect, even with special instruments.*
- These measures won’t barely address the state’s deficit.*
- The teacher never told us about the test until the day before.*
- Students never usually bother to examine the veracity of the “facts” they are supposed to memorize in history class.*

6. Tip for improving your essay

“Write with nouns and verbs. The adjective hasn’t been built that can pull a weak or inaccurate noun out of a tight place.”
—William Strunk and E.B. White, *The Elements of Style*

Although well into her eighties, Kiera had quick, intelligent eyes that were as shimmering as sunlight on a pond on a bright summer’s day, and as revealing and lively as a boisterous, impetuous child.

The above sentence is overloaded with adjectives. We can characterize Kiera much more effectively with nouns and verbs:

Although well into her eighties, Kiera had eyes that shimmered and revealed the soul of a child.

7. Tip for the multiple-choice questions

Having lived abroad for several decades, we learned a lot from our professor about foreign perceptions of the United States.

- we could learn a lot from our professor*
- we would have learned a lot from our professor*
- our professor could teach us a lot*
- our professor teaching us a lot*
- we were taught a lot by our professor*

The participle *having* dangles because its subject, *professor*, is too far away. The correct response should bring the subject closer to the participle and avoid other grammatical problems. The best choice is (C).