OWLS Writing Guides: MODIFIERS

A modifier is a word or phrase that refers to -- describes or limits-- another word, phrase, or clause. A modifier is usually an adjective (modifies a noun or pronoun) or an adverb (modifies a verb, adjective, or other adverb).

The **quick brown** fox jumped over the **lazy** dog.
Raymond **eagerly** agreed to work the remaining shifts.

A **dangling modifier** is a phrase that does not logically refer to a noun or pronoun in the rest of the sentence. That's why it is said to 'dangle' in the sentence. A dangling modifier usually occurs at the beginning of the sentence as an introductory phrase or at the end of the sentence.

Correct a dangling modifier by supplying an explicit, logical subject in the main clause, or by rewriting the faulty phrase as a clause containing an explicit subject.

Common trouble spot: -ing verb phrases. When using an –ing verb phrase, be sure that the action or state of being expressed in the modifying phrase clearly and logically relates to the subject in the main clause of the sentence, and that the subject is stated explicitly, not merely implied.

Faulty: *After finishing the tutoring session*, a break was needed. (The break did not finish the session. Supply the subject who did finish.)
Correct: After the tutoring session, we needed a break.

Faulty: Driving can be very dangerous *when intoxicated*. (Who is intoxicated?)
Correct: Driving can be very dangerous when the driver is intoxicated.

Faulty: *Reading this worksheet*, modifiers will now be used properly. (Modifiers are not reading. Supply the subject who is reading.)
Correct: Reading this worksheet, I will now use modifiers properly.

Faulty: *Driving in my car*, the pit bull chased me for two miles. (The pit bull wasn't driving. Supply the subject who was driving.)
Correct: Driving in my car, I was chased for two miles by a pit bull.
Correct: I was chased by a pit bull for two miles while I was riding in my car.

A **misplaced modifier** is a modifier that appears to modify the wrong subject in the sentence. Correct by moving the modifier closer to its true subject, so that there is no confusion about meaning.

Faulty: We saw a portrait of Queen Elizabeth *walking up the stairs* of the mansion. (The portrait wasn't walking. Move the modifier closer to its true subject.)
Correct: Walking up the stairs of the mansion, we saw a portrait of Queen Elizabeth.

Faulty: Lisa *almost* corrected all the grammar errors in her paper.
Correct: Lisa corrected *almost* all the grammar errors in her paper.