

SSU Writing Center

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Amuse Your teachers with Misplaced Modifiers

What's wrong with the following sentences?

- Hit by a car, the ambulance took Bill to the hospital.
- The mashed potatoes came to me all covered with gravy.
- Desperately running for shelter, the rain storm hit me too soon.
- Reaching for a chocolate, my mouth was watering.

All of these sentences contain **misplaced modifiers** (sometimes called “dangling modifiers”), which are words, phrases, and clauses placed in such a way as to modify the wrong object. In the first sentence, Bill was hit by the car, not the ambulance. In the second, it's the mashed potatoes that were covered with gravy, not me. See if you can spot the problems in the other sentences.

Misplaced modifiers can be unintentionally amusing:

While only four years old, my doctor told me I had tonsillitis.

Try not to amuse your reader inadvertently. Here are some more examples and some suggested revisions:

revised: Hiking in the hills, the buildings of campus could be seen.
Hiking in the hills, we could see the buildings of campus.

revised: Although a heavy eater, everyone thought he was too skinny.
Although a heavy eater, he was considered too skinny.

revised: Blissfully, the cool swimming pool enveloped me on that hot, hot day.
I swam blissfully in the cool swimming pool on that hot, hot day.

revised: Many fish were seen sailing across the bay.
We saw many fish when we were sailing across the bay.

revised: I gave the toad to Jim all slimy.
I gave the slimy toad to Jim.

revised: While very quiet in nature, we knew he had a wild heart.
Although he was quiet by nature, we knew he had a wild heart.

revised: Happily, the ice cream cone disappeared down my gullet.
Happily, I gobbled down the ice cream cone.

A Brief Quiz

Revise the following sentences to eliminate misplaced modifiers:

1. While bellowing through his trunk, the mouse pulled the thorn from the elephant's foot.
2. Sadly, the furniture perished in the fire.
3. While still a little girl, her father convinced her to become a doctor one day.
4. I showed my insect collection to my friends, dead and pinned on little cards in my office.
5. Written on the spur of the moment, the quality of the essay really suffered.
6. As a spicy food, we love tacos.
7. A tutor's job is especially stressful when faced with a big crowd of English 99 students.
8. However expensive, my supervisor demands that I get the best possible equipment.
9. Hanging from the ceiling, my guests absolutely loved my chandelier.
10. The violinist played beautifully, oblivious to the audience on stage.