

Recognizing and repairing dangling modifiers

A dangling modifier fails to refer logically to any word in the sentence. Dangling modifiers are easy to repair, but they can be hard to recognize, especially in your own writing.

Recognizing dangling modifiers

Dangling modifiers are usually word groups (such as verbal phrases) that suggest but do not name an actor. When a sentence opens with such a modifier, readers expect the subject of the next clause to name the actor. If it doesn't, the modifier dangles.

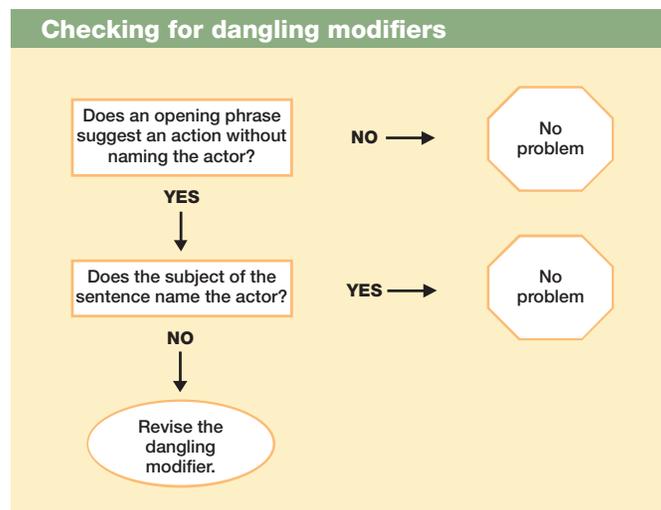
- ▶ *When the driver opened*
Opening the window to let out a huge bumblebee, the car
^
accidentally swerved into an oncoming car.
- The car didn't open the window; the driver did.

The following sentences illustrate four common kinds of dangling modifiers.

- DANGLING** *Deciding to join the navy,* the recruiter enthusiastically pumped Joe's hand. [Participial phrase]
- DANGLING** *Upon entering the doctor's office,* a skeleton caught my attention. [Preposition followed by a gerund phrase]
- DANGLING** *To please the children,* some fireworks were set off a day early. [Infinitive phrase]
- DANGLING** *Though only sixteen,* UCLA accepted Martha's application. [Elliptical clause with an understood subject and verb]

These dangling modifiers falsely suggest that the recruiter decided to join the navy, that the skeleton entered the doctor's office, that the fireworks intended to please the children, and that UCLA is only sixteen years old.

Although most readers will understand the writer's intended meaning in such sentences, the inadvertent humor can be distracting, and it can make the writer appear somewhat foolish.



(continued)

Repairing dangling modifiers

To repair a dangling modifier, you can revise the sentence in one of two ways:

1. Name the actor in the subject of the sentence, or
2. name the actor in the modifier.

Depending on your sentence, one of these revision strategies may be more appropriate than the other.

ACTOR NAMED IN SUBJECT

▶ Upon entering the doctor's office, a skeleton, ^{*I noticed*} ~~caught my~~ [^] ~~attention.~~ [^]

▶ To please the children, ^{*we set off*} some fireworks ~~were set off~~ a day [^] early.

ACTOR NAMED IN MODIFIER

▶ ^{*When Joe decided*} ~~Deciding~~ to join the navy, the recruiter enthusiastically [^] pumped ^{*his*} Joe's hand. [^]

▶ ^{*Martha was*} Though only sixteen, UCLA accepted ^{*her*} Martha's application. [^]

NOTE: You cannot repair a dangling modifier just by moving it. Consider, for example, the sentence about the skeleton. If you put the modifier at the end of the sentence (*A skeleton caught my attention upon entering the doctor's office*), you are still suggesting — absurdly, of course — that the skeleton entered the office. The only way to avoid the problem is to put the word *I* in the sentence, either as the subject or in the modifier.

▶ Upon entering the doctor's office, ^{*I noticed*} a skeleton, ~~caught my~~ [^] ~~attention.~~ [^]

▶ ^{*As I entered*} ~~Upon entering~~ the doctor's office, a skeleton caught my [^] attention.