Sometimes, there's a big difference between what a sentence should mean and what it actually says. One of the most common causes of this problem is known as a dangling modifier. In this lesson, we'll learn how to spot dangling modifiers and how to resolve the problems they cause.

What Is a Dangling Modifier?

Before we jump into the subject of this lesson, we have to define a few key terms. First things first, a modifier is any word or phrase that changes (or modifies) the meaning of another word or phrase. It is important to note that adjectives (such as 'red') and adverbs (such as 'quickly') aren't the only kinds of modifiers out there. In fact, some modifiers don't use any adjectives or adverbs at all. For example, in the phrase 'the house on the hill,' the words 'on the hill' modifies the meaning of 'the house' because it tells us where the house is located.

Next, let's talk about clauses. To put it simply, a clause is a part of a sentence. Some sentences only have one clause (such as 'I walked to the park'), but more complex sentences contain multiple clauses. For the purposes of this lesson, we'll be looking at how introductory clauses can affect the meaning of a whole sentence. An introductory clause is a clause that leads us into the main clause. For example, in the sentence 'After eating breakfast, I walked to the park,' the clause 'After eating breakfast' introduces the rest of the sentence by giving us a sense of time.

Now that we've armed ourselves with these terms, let's turn our attention to the heart of the matter: dangling modifiers. A dangling modifier is simply a modifier that isn't clearly attached to another part of the sentence (hence the word 'dangling'). Because dangling modifiers muddle the meaning of a sentence, they create ambiguity (a situation where a sentence can be read as having several different meanings). With that in mind, let's look at two (somewhat silly) examples of dangling modifiers.

- Examples

Consider the following sentence:

Putting on my pajamas, a mouse ran across the floor.

(Was the mouse putting on the pajamas??

Common sense tells us to interpret the sentence one way, but the meaning is very different if we read the sentence literally. This is an excellent example of the ambiguity that dangling modifiers create. So, how do we resolve this ambiguity? We rewrite the sentence so that there is a clear connection between the modifier and the intended subject ('I') of the sentence. This can be done in at least two ways.

The first method of resolving a dangling modifier is to make the actual subject a part of the introductory clause. Let's see what happens when we bring 'I' into the introductory clause of our example:

While I was putting on my pajamas, a mouse ran across the floor.
Putting on my pajamas, I saw a mouse run across the floor.

Some more examples:

I was late for the school bus again. Running for the bus, my book fell in the mud.
(Was the book running for the school bus? It's the only nearby noun beside mud.)

Deciding to join the navy, the recruiter enthusiastically pumped Joe's hand.
(Was the recruiter deciding to join the navy? The only other option is Joe's hand.)

Upon entering the doctor's office, a skeleton caught my attention.
(Was the skeleton entering the doctor's office? The only other option is my attention.)

Any short descriptive phrase in a sentence conventionally modifies the closest noun in that sentence. Your writing will confuse the reader if that phrase is positioned unclearly--even if the right word does appear in the same sentence. This is a subtype of the dangling modifier called a misplaced modifier.

She claimed yesterday she saw a UFO.
(Did she see the UFO yesterday? Or did she make the claim yesterday? To be clear, we must rewrite the sentence.)