Misplaced Modifiers

When we write, we often use words to ***modify*** other words. These are known as **adjectives** and **adverbs.**

Fact for the Day:

Adjectives modify ---------->Nouns

Adverbs modify ---------->Verbs

There are very important things you should remember when you use modifiers: They need to be placed as close as possible to the word they are modifying. For example, look at the following two sentences:

> The *loud* music on the speakers gave me a headache.
>
> The music on the ***loud*** speakers gave me a headache.

Notice how the meaning of the sentence changes slightly depending on where we put the adjectives.

Occasionally, students will put a modifier next to the wrong word, and this can result in saying something quite unintentional:

> The disgusting woman's food made me decide not to eat at the restaurant.

Does the writer mean to say that the woman is disgusting or her food is disgusting? It's unclear from the placement of the adjective.

> The woman's disgusting food made me decide not to eat at the restaurant.

This sentence is much clearer. The placement of the word ***disgusting*** in front of the word ***food*** makes much more sense.

Now let's look at adverbs. Consider the following example:

> Racing against the clock frantically I went through and edited my paper.

Is the writer ***racing*** frantically or ***editing*** frantically? Because the adverb ***frantically*** isn't placed right next to either word, the reader can't tell.

> ***Frantically*** racing against the clock, I went through and edited my paper.

Once you understand this concept, it is relatively easy to remember that the same rule applies to modifying ***phrase***s or ***clauses***. If you don't place them next to the word that they are modifying, you might end up saying something you didn't intend. For example:

> Papers can be picked up by students only after they have been graded and placed in the box outside my office door.

Okay, are the ***students*** being graded and placed in the box, or are the ***papers*** being graded and placed in the box? The placement of

the clause, **"after they been graded and placed in the box outside my office door"** next to the word **"students"** suggests that the clause is modifying that word, despite the fact that this doesn't really make sense.

Now look at the following revisions:

After the papers have been graded and placed in the box outside my office, students may pick them up.

Students may pick up their papers after they have been graded and placed in the box outside my office.

Notice how much easier these sentences are to read now that the modifying phrase (**have been graded and placed in the box outside my office**) and clause (**after they have been graded and placed in the box outside my office**) have been positioned near the word (**papers**) they are supposed to modify.

Just follow this general rule of thumb:

Keep your modifying words, phrases, and clauses next to the word that they are modifying.