Fixing Dangling Modifiers

What is a dangling modifier?

The term *dangling modifier* refers to a word or phrase, usually at the start of a sentence, that does not connect properly to the rest of the sentence. Dangling modifiers are easy to miss. In fact, they surface from time to time in newspapers, magazines, and academic journals. In other words, even experienced editors sometimes miss them. But once you know how to spot dangling modifiers, they are reasonably easy to fix.

How to undangle dangling modifiers

The best way to learn how to undangle a dangling modifier is to work through some examples:

> X   Tempted by the three witches' prophecy, Macbeth's moral scruples give way to his ambition.

The problem with this sentence is that Macbeth's scruples are not tempted by the prophecy; Macbeth is tempted. Observe that the opening modifier implicitly raises this question of who or what is tempted. The noun or noun phrase that immediately follows must supply the answer. To fix the problem here, we can choose a noun or phrase that does answer the question of *who*:

> ✓   Tempted by the three witches' prophecy, Macbeth allows his moral scruples to give way to his ambition.

Another solution would be to change the modifier into a clause by incorporating the subject Macbeth. Then the opening no longer raises a question that needs an immediate answer:

> ✓   After Macbeth has been tempted by the three witches' prophecy, his moral scruples give way to his ambition.

Dangling modifiers are often followed by the expletive *it*. (Expletives are words that play a role in a sentence without contributing anything to the meaning.)

> X   To institute a carbon tax, it is essential first to address the increasing influence of corporate lobbies.

Some uses of the expletive *it* are unavoidable ("it is raining outside"), but many just make sentences wordy and vague. Fixing this kind of dangling modifier can therefore solve more than one problem at once. But the solution requires that you think carefully about exactly to whom or what the modifier is trying to connect. The answer is not always that obvious. Though occasionally the collective "we" may work, always be as precise as you can:

> ✓   To institute a carbon tax, reforming politicians must first address the increasing influence of corporate lobbies.

Dangling modifiers coupled with the expletive phrase *it is* show up especially frequently in science papers, largely because some scientific contexts prefer the passive voice. However, the passive voice can sometimes lead to awkward, not to mention ungrammatical, constructions:

> X   Before adding the compound, it was determined that the solution's pH was 6.4.

It, of course, cannot add compounds to solutions, so the question of who did so remains. Often—though not always—you can rewrite the modifier and preserve the passive voice:

> ✓   Before the addition of the compound, it was determined that the solution's pH was 6.4.

But if your discipline provides any leeway (many science writers overuse the passive voice out of mere habit), the active construction will provide a much cleaner solution:

> ✓   Before adding the compound, I determined that the solution's pH was 6.4.