

## Chapter 8

# The Correct Use of Modifiers

## Comparison and Placement

A modifier describes or limits the meaning of another word. There are two kinds of modifiers, adjectives and adverbs. Besides one-word modifiers, you have studied several other kinds of modifiers – prepositional phrases, verbal phrases, and subordinate clauses, all of which may be used as adjectives or adverbs.

### COMPARISON OF MODIFIERS

Adjectives state qualities of nouns or pronouns:

rough road, happy children, friendly dog

You can show the degree or extent to which one noun has a quality by comparing it with another noun which has the same quality. For instance:

This road is rougher than that road.

Similarly, you can show degree or extent by using adverbs to make comparisons:

Although I did my chores quickly, Gwen did her work more quickly.

### 8a. The forms of modifiers change as they are used in comparison.

There are three degrees of comparison: *positive*, *comparative*, and *superlative*. Notice below how the forms of modifiers change to show comparison.

### Regular Comparison

**(1) A modifier of one syllable regularly forms its comparative and superlative by adding *-er* and *-est*.**

POSITIVE	COMPARATIVE	SUPERLATIVE
low	lower	lowest
soon	sooner	soonest
kind	kinder	kindest

**(2) Some modifiers of two syllables form their comparative and superlative degrees by adding *-er* and *-est*; other modifiers of two syllables form their comparative and superlative degrees by means of *more* and *most*.**

In general, the *-er*, *-est* forms are used with two-syllable modifiers unless they make the word sound awkward. The *more*, *most* forms are used with adverbs ending in *-ly*.

POSITIVE	COMPARATIVE	SUPERLATIVE
simple	simpler	simplest
pretty	prettier	prettiest
foolish	more foolish	most foolish
gracious	more gracious	most gracious
slowly	more slowly	most slowly

• **USAGE NOTE** Some two-syllable modifiers may take either *-er*, *-est* or *more*, *most*: *handsome*, *handsomer*, *handsomest* or *handsome*, *more handsome*, *most handsome*.

When in doubt about which way a two-syllable modifier is compared, consult an unabridged dictionary.

**EXERCISE 1.** Write the forms for the comparative and superlative degrees of these words:

- |            |            |
|------------|------------|
| 1. loose   | 6. funny   |
| 2. often   | 7. wise    |
| 3. lazy    | 8. safely  |
| 4. harmful | 9. eager   |
| 5. gentle  | 10. lovely |

**(3) Modifiers having more than two syllables form their comparative and superlative degrees by means of *more* and *most*.**

POSITIVE	COMPARATIVE	SUPERLATIVE
intelligent	more intelligent	most intelligent
favorably	more favorably	most favorably

**EXERCISE 2.** *Oral Drill.* Give comparative and superlative degrees of (1) *original*, (2) *reasonably*, (3) *significant*, (4) *appropriately*, and (5) *pessimistic*.

**(4) Comparison to indicate less or least of a quality is accomplished by using the words *less* and *least* before the modifier.**

POSITIVE	COMPARATIVE	SUPERLATIVE
useful	less useful	least useful
often	less often	least often

**EXERCISE 3.** *Oral Drill.* Give comparison to indicate less and least of the five words listed in Exercise 2.

## Irregular Comparison

Adjectives and adverbs that do not follow the regular methods of forming their comparative and superlative degrees are said to be compared irregularly.

POSITIVE	COMPARATIVE	SUPERLATIVE
bad	worse	worst
good/well	better	best
many/ much	more	most

*Caution:* Do not add the *-er*, *-est* or *more*, *most* forms to irregularly compared forms: *worse*, not *worser* or *more worse*.

**EXERCISE 4.** Be prepared to give the correct forms of the comparative and superlative degrees when your teacher dictates the positive forms of the five adjectives and adverbs listed in the previous table.

**REVIEW EXERCISE A.** Write the comparative and superlative forms of the following modifiers. If you are in doubt about the forms of two-syllable modifiers, look up the positive forms in an unabridged dictionary.

1. bad
2. good
3. neat
4. late
5. many
6. witty
7. tough
8. lonely
9. weak
10. well
11. quiet
12. widely
13. little
14. comic
15. trivial
16. firmly
17. practical
18. absorbent
19. precisely
20. desolate

**REVIEW EXERCISE B.** Use the comparative or superlative forms of items 1-5 in Review Exercise A in sentences of your own.

## Use of Comparative and Superlative Forms

**8b. Use the comparative degree when comparing two things; use the superlative degree when comparing more than two.**

The comparative form of a modifier is used for comparing two things, as these examples indicate.

**EXAMPLES** Mount McKinley is higher than Pikes Peak.  
Skywriting is more spectacular than billboard advertising.

The superlative form of a modifier is used for comparing three or more items.

**EXAMPLES** Mount McKinley is the highest peak in North America.  
Skywriting is the most spectacular way to advertise.

**• USAGE NOTE** In everyday conversation, it is acceptable in some cases to use the superlative degree in comparing two things: *Put your best foot forward.*

**EXERCISE 5.** Using the correct forms of adjectives or adverbs, write five sentences comparing two things and five comparing more than two.

### 8c. Do not omit the words *other* or *else* when comparing one thing with a group of which it is a part.

It is illogical to say “Mary Lou is more imaginative than any student in her class.” Obviously, Mary Lou is a member of her class, and she cannot be more imaginative than herself. The word *other* should be supplied: “Mary Lou is more imaginative than any *other* student in her class.”

**ILLOGICAL** My cat Grumpy is smarter than any cat.

**CORRECTED** My cat Grumpy is smarter than any other cat.

Similarly, “The left tackle weighs more than anyone on the football team” is incorrect, since the left tackle is a member of the team. Here *else* should be added: “The left tackle weighs more than anyone *else* on the team.”

**ILLOGICAL** Naomi jumped higher than anyone.

**CORRECTED** Naomi jumped higher than anyone else.

**EXERCISE 6.** *Oral Drill.* The comparisons in this exercise are illogical because of the omission of the words *other* or *else*. Supply the needed word as you read the sentences, so that the sentences will be logical.

1. Dora Yardley is wiser than any person I know.
2. My sister receives more mail than anyone in my family.
3. Your suggestion may be more sensible than any suggestion that has been made so far.
4. Russ can run faster than anybody on the team.
5. The picture he gave me is more valuable to me than anything I own.

### 8d. Avoid double comparisons.

A double comparison is one in which the degree is formed incorrectly by both adding *-er* or *-est* and using *more* or *most*.

**NONSTANDARD** Kay is more friendlier than Morris.

**STANDARD** Kay is friendlier than Morris.

**NONSTANDARD** This coin is the most unuasalest item in my collection.

**STANDARD** This coin is the most unusual item in my collection.

**EXERCISE 7.** Number your paper 1-10. Copy each incorrect modifier, crossing out the unnecessary part in order to eliminate the double comparison.

**EXAMPLE** 1. I am determined to study more harder this term than I did last.

1. ~~more~~ *harder*

2. That is the most elegantest tablecloth I have ever seen.

2. *most elegantly*

1. Today is more colder than yesterday.
2. Mother is the most patientest person in our family.
3. Is Nita now working even more faster than before?
4. A jaguar runs even more faster than a horse.
5. He is the most stubbornest child in the family.
6. About nine o'clock, the noise became more louder.
7. This is the most loveliest day!
8. Rosemary Casals had a more harder serve than her tennis partner.
9. The patient is more quieter than he was last night.
10. Then I made the most stupidest remark.

### 8e. Be sure your comparisons are clear.

Your sentences should state clearly what things are being compared; for example, in the sentence “The population of New York is greater than Chicago,” the comparison is not clear. *The population of New York* is not being compared to *Chicago*, but rather to *the population of Chicago*. The sentence should read: *The population of New York is greater than the population (or that) of Chicago.*

**UNCLEAR** Statistics prove that traveling in airplanes is safer than automobiles.

**BETTER** Statistics prove that traveling in airplanes is safer than traveling in automobiles.

Often an incomplete construction will be used in a comparison: *I am happier than she*. Both parts of the comparison should be stated if there is danger of misunderstanding.

**UNCLEAR** I like her better than Isabel.

**BETTER** I like her better than I like Isabel. or I like her better than Isabel likes her.

**REVIEW EXERCISE C.** Number your paper 1-20. If all the modifiers in a sentence are correct, write a *C* after the corresponding number on your paper. If a modifier is incorrect, rewrite the sentence, making whatever correction is

needed.

1. When the tortoise and the hare raced, the hare proved to be faster, but the tortoise won the race because it was more persistent.
2. Of all the animals at the zoo, the monkeys were the noisier creatures.
3. She is the most happiest child I know.
4. My friend, who later became a star on Broadway, had more talent than any actor in his class.
5. Sarah has read many detective stories, and this is the best one that she has found.
6. Our guide explained that the next place we were to visit would be farther from town.
7. Earth is more nearer the sun than Mars is.
8. She skied better than anyone in her group.
9. After the stranger had examined the two paths, he took the one that looked easiest to follow.
10. Tantalus was more cruelly punished than any legendary figure.
11. My aunt, who is a born pessimist, felt much more securer after she had inspected the plane.
12. Of the two pieces of cake, he politely chose the smallest one.
13. Which city is largest – Chicago or Los Angeles?
14. Sherlock Holmes is more famous than any detective in literature.
15. Donna thought that the masks worn in the ancient Greek plays were the most grotesque ones that she had ever seen.
16. After examining all three costumes, the director decided that this one was the most appropriate for her play.
17. Today. Kevin worked longer on the parallel bars than anyone on the gymnastic squad.
18. Which country is farthest from the United States – France or Japan?
19. Many people think that the panther is the most fiercest animal in the world.
20. We were more interested in studying the history of the Egyptians than any other ancient people.

## **DANGLING MODIFIERS**

**8f. A modifying phrase or clause that does not clearly and sensibly modify a word in the sentence is a *dangling modifier*.**

When a modifying phrase containing a verbal comes at the beginning of a

sentence, the phrase is followed by a comma. Immediately after that comma should come the word that the word group modifies. Notice in the following two examples how the introductory expressions clearly and sensibly modify the words which follow the commas.

Recovering from an illness, I was marked absent. [*I was recovering.*]

Nailed to the gate, a no-trespassing sign attracted Patty's attention.  
[The *sign* was nailed to the gate.]

Each of the following sentences contains a dangling modifier—that is, a modifier which either appears to modify a word other than the one it is meant to modify or doesn't modify any word at all.

Recovering from an illness, the teacher marked me absent. [[he sentence implies that the teacher was recovering.]

Nailed to the gate, Patty noticed a no-trespassing sign. [Obviously, Patty was not nailed to the gate.] Walking down the street, his eyes showed constant surprise. [Did his eyes walk down the street?]

**EXERCISE 8.** Write complete sentences using the following introductory modifiers. Follow each modifier by a word it can *clearly* and *sensibly* modify.

EXAMPLE      1. Dodging his opponents,  
                    1. *Dodging his opponents, Jim Plunkett passed the ball.*

1. Exploding unexpectedly,
2. Shocked by Gerald's rudeness.
3. Leaping from branch to branch,
4. Waddling along the beach,
5. Scratching her head,
6. Not expecting the interruption,
7. Planning a birthday party for her,
8. Paying close attention in class,
9. To avoid being caught in the rain,
10. Trying to keep from laughing,

### **Correcting Dangling Modifiers**

To correct a dangling modifier, you should either rearrange the words in the sentence or add words to make the meaning logical and clear.

**DANGLING**      To win and hold friends, petty quarrels and criticism should

be avoided.

**CORRECTED** To win and hold friends, you should avoid petty quarrels and criticism.

or If you wish to win and hold friends, you should avoid petty quarrels and criticism.

**DANGLING** While lighting the birthday candles, the cake started to crumble.

**CORRECTED** While I was lighting the birthday candles, the cake started to crumble. or While lighting the birthday candles- I noticed the cake starting to crumble.

**EXERCISE 9.** Eliminate the dangling modifiers in the following sentences by rewriting each sentence so that each modifier clearly and sensibly modifies a word in the sentence. You will have to supply words.

1. Jogging along the path, the fresh air made me feel truly alive.
2. While putting the roast in the oven, the doorbell suddenly rang.
3. To finish my term paper on time, all my holidays and weekends were spent in the library.
4. Warped all around the edge. I promptly returned the record album for a refund.
5. After looking at hundreds of new coats, a beautiful parka suddenly caught my eye.
6. Having turned on the video cassette player, the opening credits of a movie appeared on the screen.
7. While landing at Dulles Airport, Arlington National Cemetery came into view.
8. Feeling very tired, the overstuffed chair looked inviting to me.
9. To get a driver's license, a written test is required first.
10. Having just bought a new aquarium, two guppies became its first occupants.

**EXERCISE 10.** Many sentences below contain dangling modifiers; some do not. Number your paper 1-20. If a sentence is correct, write a C after the corresponding number. If it is incorrect, rewrite the sentence to eliminate the dangling modifier.

1. After saying grace. dinner was served.
2. To appreciate good music, you should learn to play an instrument.
3. While trimming the rosebushes this morning, a spider bit me.

4. Made of durable plastic, a child cannot easily break these toy trucks.
5. G littering in the soft, silent moonlight, the water looked beautiful and seemed inviting to us.
6. Filled with high school students, the visitors could not find an empty seat in the auditorium.
7. While listening to the radio, I soon fell asleep.
8. While reading my assignment by the river, the wind kept blowing dust into my eyes.
9. Although ringing loudly, no one seemed to hear the bell.
10. Running across the meadow, my ankle was sprained.
11. To become a great athlete, physical endurance is necessary.
12. To become well informed, you should make a habit of reading newspapers and magazines.
13. To earn spending money, Mrs. Lewis gave me a job as cashier in her store.
14. After mopping the kitchen, the baby woke up and . began to cry.
15. After being in school all day, a long hike is refreshing.
16. Sitting up on its hind legs, the squirrel munched an acorn.
17. When learning to swim, everything that one tries seems ridiculous at first.
18. While walking alone in the woods, it is good to hear the birds singing.
19. Before going to bed on a cold night, the thermostat setting should be lowered.
20. When trying to understand the meaning of a sentence, look at the little words, the prepositions and conjunctions.

## **MISPLACED MODIFIERS**

A dangling modifier, as the preceding exercises have shown, makes the meaning of a sentence absurd because the modifier either seems to modify a word which it cannot sensibly modify or is left without any word to modify at all. Just as damaging to the clear expression of ideas are misplaced modifiers.

**8g. Modifying phrases and clauses should be placed as near as possible to the words they modify.**

### **Misplaced Phrase Modifiers**

The following examples of misplaced phrases show the importance of placing phrase modifiers as near as possible to the words they modify.

**MISPLACED** Skipper enjoyed the chunks of steak slipped to him by the

guests under the table. [Here *under the table* seems to indicate where the guests were.]

**CORRECTED** Skipper enjoyed the chunks of steak slipped under the table to him by the guests.

**MISPLACED** At the age of four, my mother taught me a lesson.

**CORRECTED** At the age of four, I learned a lesson from my mother. or My mother taught me a lesson when I was four years old.

**MISPLACED** A lovely rose garden was planned by the President's committee behind the White House.

**CORRECTED** A lovely rose garden behind the White House was planned by the President's committee.

**EXERCISE 11.** Rewrite the following sentences so that they make sense.

Either place phrase modifiers as near as possible to the words they modify or turn a phrase into a clause. Be sure that you do not misplace another modifier in rewriting.

1. At five years of age, my grandmother bought me a pony.
2. On the bottom shelf of the refrigerator, I could not find the fruit juice.
3. There should be a letter written by Aunt Lizzy in your post office box.
4. I ate two peaches and a plate of strawberries with relish.
5. The police officer told the frightened children what they were doing wrong with a smile.
6. Homesick, Norma yearned to see the Rocky Mountains in Europe.
7. The job was selling boxes of candy to children with prizes in them.
8. In a tiny cage at the dog pound, we felt very sorry for the little bulldog.
9. I read about the kidnappers who were captured in this morning's paper.
10. The names of the players were called out by the announcer in the starting lineup.
11. I saw her make a thrilling slalom run on my cousin's television set.
12. He told us about roping steers in the school cafeteria.
13. The principal congratulated three students for their community work during the school assembly.
14. The governor agreed to punish every driver who endangers the lives of others without delay.
15. The play by Lorraine Hansberry will be performed for the benefit of the local hospital in the school auditorium.
16. On the way to the grocery store, the streets seemed slippery.
17. The fans jeered at the referee in the stand&.

18. The thief was arrested soon after her grocery store had been robbed by the police.
19. Inside the oven I noticed that the turkey was burning.
20. We waved at the workers repairing the highway from our car.

## Misplaced Clause Modifiers

Place an adjective or adverb clause as near as possible to the word it modifies. Notice how the meaning of the sentence below is distorted by a misplaced clause modifier.

**MISPLACED**      The car belongs to our neighbor that has long, sweeping tail fins.

Since the modifying clause *that has long, sweeping tail fins* seems to modify *neighbor*, the sentence is ridiculous. The clause should be close to the word it modifies, as follows:

**CORRECTED**      The car that has long, sweeping tail fins belongs to our neighbor.

To correct misplaced clauses, place the modifying clause as close as possible to the word it modifies.

**MISPLACED**      The book is still in my locker that I should have returned weeks ago.

**CORRECTED**      The book that I should have returned weeks ago is still in my locker.

**MISPLACED**      There was a flag on the stage which had only forty-eight stars.

**CORRECTED**      On the stage there was a flag which had only forty-eight stars.

**EXERCISE 12.** Read each of the following sentences. Decide what word the misplaced clause should modify, and rewrite the sentence, placing the clause near this word.

1. A trunk stood on the step which was covered with labels.
2. A dog ran onto the football field that looked a lot like our club mascot.
3. We waved to the girl as we left the town that had given us directions.
4. There are several books on our shelves which were written by Jessamyn West.
5. The battered car now sits in the garage that went out of control on the

expressway yesterday.

6. There was a rosebush behind the pile of trash which was very beautiful.
7. Birds were kept away by scarecrows, which like to eat seeds.
8. We crossed the Mississippi River on a long bridge which was almost a mile wide.
9. A large dog was trotting behind the little boy that was growling as if he were getting ready to attack me.
10. We played in two old shacks between the post office and the bank which weren't being lived in at the time.

**REVIEW EXERCISE D.** The sentences below contain dangling modifiers, misplaced modifiers, and errors in comparison. Rewrite the sentences so that the meaning is clear.

1. She plays both tennis and golf, but she likes tennis best.
2. He served sandwiches to Elmer and me, packed with pickles, garlic, tomatoes, and cheese.
3. Everyone was waiting for the teacher in English class.
4. Jill is certainly more taller than you.
5. We didn't see the tornado approaching in the storm cellar.
6. After boiling for exactly three minutes, Emma poured cold water over the eggs.
7. The dead snake was brought into camp by a cub scout six feet long.
8. Trying to remember my lines, my heart pounded against my ribs. ,
9. While taking her final exam, Yvonne's pen ran out of ink.
10. The height of these new buildings is not so great as the old buildings.
11. The hotel was pointed out to us by a tourist that had hot and cold running water, television, and a swimming pool.
12. To avoid the hot sun, our plans were to travel at night.
13. Flying at half-mast, my heart grew sad when I saw the flag.
14. After completing my homework, the doorbell rang.
15. Before leaving school, my homework was all done.
16. We waited for you until the movie started at the heater entrance.
17. Stepping out into the blinding snowstorm, my teeth chattered, and my hands grew numb.
18. To find jack rabbits, my neighbor's oat field is a good place.
19. After knocking out the heavyweight champion, the referee announced the winner.
20. We found an old jack in the trunk which wouldn't work.

**REVIEW EXERCISE E.** All of the following sentences contain errors in the use of modifiers or appositives: mistakes in comparisons or dangling or misplaced modifiers. After the proper number, rewrite each sentence so that it is clear and correct.

1. When traveling through the highlands in Scotland, I discovered that stories about monsters were more popular than any kind of story .
2. Having received a great deal of publicity, I already knew about the so-called Loch Ness monster.
3. The first person to sight the monster, a veterinary student from Edinburgh, was Arthur Grant.
4. One day Grant came upon a strange creature cycling on a road near the shore of Loch Ness.
5. On cycling closer, the monster took two great leaps and plunged into the lake.
6. As you might expect, numerous theories were presented about the identity of the monster in the local newspaper.
7. Some people thought the monster must be a freshwater species of sea serpent, and others believed the whole story was a hoax; of these two theories, the first is obviously the most fascinating.
8. Having found a huge, dead creature on the shore of the lake in 1942, the mystery of the monster was believed finally to be solved.
9. The scientists called it a large shark who examined the specimen. .
10. Though having supposedly gone from the lake, many new sightings of the monster have been reported.