12 Modification

As a rule, modifiers should be placed as close as possible to the nouns, pronouns, or phrases they modify. When modifiers are separated from the words or phrases they modify, the result is often unclear and sometimes completely absurd. **Although modification errors are of course presented in the context of passages, they involve only the sentences in which they appear; you do not need to consider the surrounding information.**

There are two potential types of modification errors:

1) Dangling Modifiers

2) Misplaced Modifiers

Dangling Modifiers

Sentences that include dangling modifiers are characterized by an introductory phrase that describes (modifies) the subject but does not name it. This phrase is always followed by a comma.

In addition, introductory phrases often—but not always—begin with *-ing* words (participles).

Whenever a sentence contains an introductory phrase, the subject must appear immediately after the comma. If the subject does not appear in that place, the modifier is dangling, and the sentence is incorrect.

Incorrect: **Stretching** from one end of the city to the other, the efficiency of Lisbon's traditional tram system often surprises both tourists and city residents.

The above sentence contains an introductory phrase that begins with an *-ing* word (*Stretching*) and does not name the subject—that is, it does not tell us *what* stretches from one end of the city to the other.

We must therefore ask ourselves what stretches from one end of the city to the other. When we look at the rest of the sentence, it is clear that this description can only refer to Lisbon's traditional tram system.

The words *Lisbon's traditional tram system* do not appear immediately after the comma, so the modifier is dangling. In order to fix the sentence, we must place *Lisbon's traditional tram system* (the subject) immediately after the comma.

Correct: **Stretching** from one end of the city to the other, Lisbon's traditional tram system often surprises both tourists and city residents with its efficiency.

Some modifiers do not begin with *–ing* words.

Incorrect: An elementary school teacher from Arkansas, increased funding and support for public libraries were what Bessie Boehm Moore advocated for.

Who was the elementary school teacher from Arkansas? *Bessie Boehm Moore*, not *increased funding and support*. So *Bessie Boehm Moore*, the subject, must be placed immediately after the comma.

Correct: An elementary school teacher from Arkansas, **Bessie Boehm Moore** advocated for increased funding and support for public libraries.

Watch out for the possessive version of the subject placed immediately after the introductory phrase. In general, any possessive noun placed immediately after an introductory phrase will be incorrect.

Incorrect: An elementary school teacher from Arkansas, **Bessie Boehm Moore's goal** was to achieve increased funding and support for public libraries.

Who is the elementary school teacher from Arkansas? *Bessie Boehm Moore*, not her *goal*.

Correct: An elementary school teacher from Arkansas, **Bessie Boehm Moore** had the goal of achieving increased funding and support for public libraries.

It is, however, acceptable to begin the main clause with a modifier describing the subject because that description is considered part of the **complete subject**.

Correct: A native of Arkansas, **elementary school teacher Bessie Boehm Moore** had the goal of achieving increased funding and support for public libraries.

Important: When fixing dangling modifiers, focus on identifying who or what the introductory phrase refers to (i.e., the subject). The correct answer must place the subject right afterwards. For example:

Josephine Baker, born Freda Josephine McDonald in a small Missouri town, spent the majority of her career in Europe. In the 1920s, Baker took Paris by storm. Famed for her jaw-dropping performances, _____ By 1927, she was one of the most photographed women in the world.

1 Mark for Review

Which choice completes the text so that it conforms to the conventions of Standard English?

Ⓐ one of her costumes consisted of 16 bananas strung onto a skirt.

Ⓑ her costume once consisting of 16 bananas strung onto a skirt.

Ⓒ she once wore a costume consisting of 16 bananas strung onto a skirt.

Ⓓ 16 bananas strung onto a skirt once formed one of her costumes.

Who was *famed for her jaw-dropping performances*? Josephine Baker (not her skirt). So "Josephine Baker," the subject, must appear at the beginning of the correct answer. (C) is the only possible answer.

Misplaced Modifiers

Misplaced modifiers can occur anywhere in a sentence. They also involve modifiers separated from the words/phrases they are intended to modify, and they often result in unintentionally ridiculous statements.

Incorrect: An allergic reaction is usually characterized by symptoms that appear at most two hours after a person has consumed a particular food such as itching or swelling.

Understood literally, this sentence indicates that itching and swelling are particular types of food. Clearly, however, they are symptoms of an allergic reaction. To correct the sentence, we must make that fact clear.

Correct: An allergic reaction usually begins at most two hours after a person has consumed a particular food and is characterized by itching and swelling.

Important: *Which* should refer to the noun before it. The placement of *which* in the incorrect version below implies the environmental movement rather than pesticides caused bird populations to drop,

Incorrect: Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring* revealed the dangers of pesticides and initiated the environmental movement, **which** had caused a sharp decline in bird populations.

Correct: The environmental movement was initiated when Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring* revealed the dangers of pesticides, **which** had caused a sharp decline in bird populations.

Let's look at a test-style example.

Pigeons have long played an important role as messengers, as a result of their homing ability, speed, and altitude. _____ a time when the city was surrounded by Prussian troops.

1 Mark for Review

Which choice completes the text so that it conforms to the conventions of Standard English?

(A) During the Franco-Prussian War in 1871, the French military used pigeons to transport messages to Paris,

(B) During the Franco-Prussian War in 1871, pigeons were used by the French military to transport messages to Paris,

(C) Pigeons were used to transport messages to Paris during the Franco-Prussian War in 1871,

(D) In 1871, during the Franco-Prussian War, the French military using pigeons to transport messages to Paris,

Because the words *a time* appear after the comma, the information right before the comma must refer to a time. Only (C) does so, making it correct. Note that it is only necessary to look at the **end** of each answer.

It is also possible that misplaced modifiers involving parentheses will be tested. In such cases, the information at the beginning of the parentheses must refer to the noun right before it. For example:

Pigeons have long played an important role as messengers, as a result of their homing ability, speed, and altitude. _____ (a time when the city was surrounded by Prussian troops).

1 Mark for Review

Which choice completes the text so that it conforms to the conventions of Standard English?

Ⓐ During the Franco-Prussian War in 1871, the French military used pigeons to transport messages to Paris

Ⓑ During the Franco-Prussian War in 1871, pigeons were used by the French military to transport messages to Paris

Ⓒ Pigeons were used to transport messages to Paris during the Franco-Prussian War in 1871

Ⓓ In 1871, during the Franco-Prussian War, the French military using pigeons to transport messages to Paris

The parenthetical information right after the blank begins with *a time*, so the answer must end with "1871." Again, (C) is correct.

This concept could also be tested the other way around:

Pigeons have long played an important role as messengers, as a result of their homing ability, speed, and altitude. During the Franco-Prussian War in 1871, the French military used pigeons to transport messages to Paris _____

1 Mark for Review

Which choice completes the text so that it conforms to the conventions of Standard English?

Ⓐ (a time when the city was surrounded by Prussian troops).

Ⓑ (at the time, the city was surrounded by Prussian troops).

Ⓒ (that time being one when the city was surrounded by Prussian troops).

Ⓓ (the city was surrounded by Prussian troops at the time).

The biggest trap you could fall into here is to focus on the answer choices alone, without considering the information that comes before the parentheses. You could eliminate (C) based on the presence of the gerund "being," but after that you might run into trouble because all of the answers are grammatically acceptable.

In reality, the key to answering this question is to look at the noun that comes right before the open parenthesis: in this case, *Paris*. Paris is a city, so the parenthetical information must begin by referring to that fact. (D) is the only option that begins with "the city," so it is the only possible answer.

Exercise: Modification (answers p. 217)

1. In addition to being a politician, Theodore Roosevelt was also an ardent naturalist. Following his defeat in the 1912 presidential election, _____ where he collected many new animal and insect specimens.

Ⓐ he undertook along the Amazon basin an expedition,

Ⓑ an expedition along the Amazon was taken by him,

Ⓒ he undertook an expedition along the Amazon basin,

Ⓓ he had undertaken an expedition along the Amazon basin and

2. One of the greatest musicians of her time, _____. By the age of twelve, she was renowned throughout Europe as both a performer and a composer.

Ⓐ Clara Wieck's piano studies began when she was five.

Ⓑ Clara Wieck's piano studies began at five years old.

Ⓒ at five years old Clara Wieck began her study of the piano.

Ⓓ Clara Wieck began her piano studies when she was five years old.

3. When President James Polk officially confirmed the discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill in Coloma, California, in 1848, hopeful prospectors immediately began planning for the trip. Beginning their journey in the spring of 1849, _____ that was risky and mostly unknown. Some forty-niners traveled alone, but most formed companies that enabled them to share food and expenses during the long journey.

Ⓐ these prospectors took an overland route, known as "forty-niners,"

Ⓑ these prospectors, known as "forty-niners," took an overland route

Ⓒ an overland route was taken by these prospectors, known as "forty-niners"

Ⓓ these prospectors, known as "forty-niners," taking an overland route

4. Environmentalists estimate that nearly a trillion plastic bags—in use since the 1970s—are produced worldwide each year. The problems that they cause are well known: unable to break down in landfills, _____ They also contain toxic dyes that contaminate water and soil. As a result, an increasing number of cities are banning their use.

Ⓐ animals are harmed when they consume the bags.

Ⓑ the bags harm the animals that consume them.

Ⓒ animals are harmed by consuming the bags.

Ⓓ harm is caused to animals that consume them.

5. Bioluminescence is light created by a chemical reaction produced within an organism. Most bioluminescent organisms are found in the ocean, although a few, including fireflies and certain fungi, are found on land. _____ some form of bioluminescence is produced by approximately 90% of deep-sea creatures, including fish, bacteria, and jellies.

Ⓐ Dwelling almost exclusively in saltwater habitats,

Ⓑ They dwell almost exclusively within saltwater habitats,

Ⓒ Saltwater habitats being dwelled in almost exclusively by them,

Ⓓ Bioluminescent organisms dwell almost exclusively in saltwater habitats, and

6. Guerilla films are typically made by independent producers who lack the budget to obtain permits, rent locations, and build expensive sets. In the past, these films were often poorly made; however, their quality has improved significantly. While it was once difficult for filmmakers to obtain the necessary equipment, _____

Ⓐ professional quality digital cameras are now widely available to filmmakers that are inexpensive.

Ⓑ professional quality digital cameras are now widely available to filmmakers, and these are inexpensive.

Ⓒ inexpensive professional quality digital cameras are now widely available to filmmakers.

Ⓓ now, professional quality digital cameras are widely available to filmmakers that are inexpensive.