

# Aula 4

## SENTENCE STRUCTURE: CORRECTING MISPLACED OR DANGLING MODIFIERS

### **META**

Improve knowledge about sentence structure through learning how to avoid misplaced or dangling modifiers.

### **OBJETIVOS**

At the end of this class, it is expected that the students:  
Improve their knowledge about sentence structure;  
Write clear sentences making use of standard written English;  
Make correct use of modifiers to avoid the production of confusing texts.

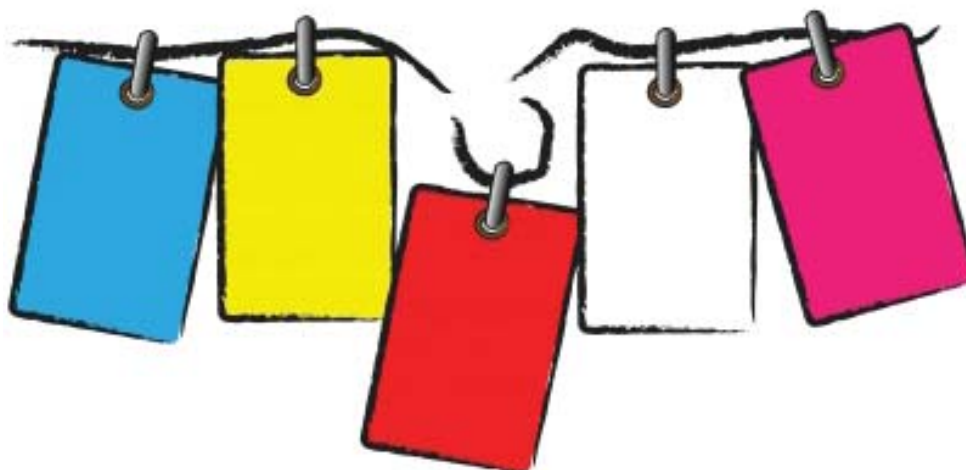
### **PRERREQUISITOS**

Previous knowledge about subject/verb agreement and dependent and independent clauses.

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### INTRODUCTION

Welcome to class 04! Your job in Unit 1 has been helping you improve your writing thought different elements related to sentence structure. Our focus now will be on how to recognize and avoid using misplaced or dangling modifiers. As we've been pointing out, you have to make the most of each class because we've been offering you great opportunities for reviewing topics from previous semesters, and for consolidating knowledge not only about writing in English but also in Portuguese. Are you ready?



<http://www.freedigitalphotos.net/> Photo by photoexplorer. Published on 07 May 2012  
Stock photo - Image ID: 10082204. May 25th, 2016)



The image below shows that one of the colorful labels has got disconnected from the others. So, it broke the harmony that existed previously. Let's use this image to keep on talking about sentence structure. In a sentence, if one or more words lose connection, the message gets unclear and it turns into a problem.

With that in mind, how about starting from answering this quiz about misplaced or dangling modifiers? The activity was adapted from [http://aliscot.com/bigdog/dmmm\\_exercise.htm](http://aliscot.com/bigdog/dmmm_exercise.htm). You can go there to check for more grammar activities if you wish.

1. Read the sentences carefully and mark the ones that are correct (clear, not confusing):

- ( ) Piled up next to the washer, I began doing the laundry.
- ( ) I began doing the laundry piled up next to the washer.
- ( ) While John was talking on the phone, the doorbell rang.
- ( ) While talking on the phone, the doorbell rang.

- ( ) Standing on the balcony, the ocean view was magnificent.
- ( ) Standing on the balcony, we had a magnificent ocean view.
- ( ) As I was running across the floor, the rug slipped and I lost my balance.
- ( ) Running across the floor, the rug slipped and I lost my balance.

### COMMENTS ON THE ACTIVITY

There was something weird about some of the sentences, right? The message got confusing. The type of problem we have found here is called dangling modifiers. We must avoid them because they break the flow of ideas. Well, you may be asking: what are dangling modifiers? Look at the image below. You see some light bulbs hanging, right? One of them is not close to the others. It is just there, hanging/dangling. Imagine that the others need it to be well connected to them so the entire line of light bulbs can fully work.



<http://www.freedigitalphotos.net/> Photo by Sira Anamwong. Published on 20 August 2015  
Stock photo - Image ID: 10035386. Last access on May 25th, 2016)

The same thing can be said about the words in a sentence: “Dangling modifiers have no word or phrase to describe; they just dangle, or hang, in the sentence without something to hold on to” (THURMAN, 2002, p. 160). That is problem in writing and speaking, don’t you agree? Let’s go back to the activity above. When it is said that:

Piled up next to the washer, I began doing the laundry...

... well, of course there is a problem there. What does it mean? That YOU were piled up next to the washer, or THE LAUNDRY (dirty clothes) was piled up next to the washer? See? “Piled up next to the washer” does not make sense. It is just hanging, without the right connection to the rest of the information. That’s why the correct sentence is:

I began doing the laundry piled up next to the washer (correct!)

Let’s go to another example from the same activity:

While talking on the phone, the doorbell rang..

Wait a minute! How can that be? The doorbell was talking on the phone? Of course not! JOHN was talking on the phone! That's why, the correct sentence is:

While John was talking on the phone, the doorbell rang (correct!)

Correct answers:

Standing on the balcony, we had a magnificent ocean view.

As I was running across the floor, the rug slipped and I lost my balance.

Let's see another example used to explain what dangling modifiers are. The following information was taken from the Oxford Dictionaries Language Matters website, available on <http://blog.oxforddictionaries.com/2011/09/participles-how-not-to-dangle/>. Last access on May 08th.

Born in Russia, his most famous opera is ...'

The problem stems from the fact that the first part of the sentence (the subordinate clause 'born in Russia') doesn't have an explicit subject, although from the context you'd expect it to be a person. The next words you see ('his most famous opera') are the subject of the sentence, but they clearly don't match the preceding clause, because an opera cannot be born (unless one was writing figuratively). Result? A possibly disconcerted, even irate, reader and an embarrassed junior lexicographer.

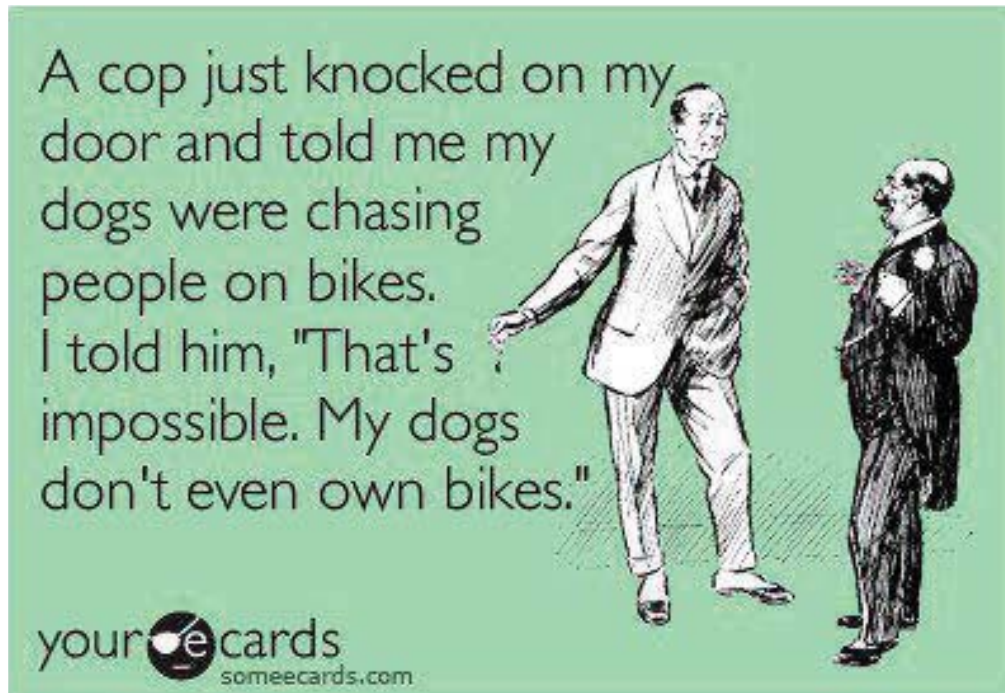
This type of grammatical faux pas is called a dangling participle (the participle here being 'born'), otherwise known as a 'dangler' and (rather less picturesquely) as an 'unattached', 'misrelated', or 'hanging' participle. Fortunately, my grammatically expert colleagues edited my work and prevented me from dangling my participles for all to see in the published dictionary.

### **Wrapping it up...**

So, were the examples, my explanation, and the information from the Oxford website enough to help you understand what dangling modifiers are? If you still have doubts, talk to your teachers and classmates about it and do your own research. There are many links that can help you with grammar. Besides, there will be more opportunities for you to practice throughout the semester. Now, we will move on to another writing problem that must be avoided: misplaced modifiers.

## **MISPLACED MODIFIERS**

Misplaced modifiers are phrases or words that are not used in the correct place in a sentence. As you know, a simple rule is that words (phrases, single words, clauses) need to be as close as possible to the information they want to modify. That is, when we want to offer information about a person, for instance, we need to use words that describe the subject we are talking about. If we misplace something, the message loses its meaning, just like you can observe in the images below:



<https://cdn.shopify.com>



<http://lh4.ggpht.com>

Let's analyse statement #1: "...my dogs were chasing people on bikes...". It does not make sense. Dogs don't ride bikes, except the ones trained to perform at the circus, right? Take a look now:

A cop just knocked on my door and told me my dogs were chasing BIKE RIDERS.

There are no doubts know. The dogs were not riding bikes. Got it? They were chasing people who were riding bikes.

Sentence #2 is from a text found on a traffic sign. According to what it is said, it can be interpreted as an area where people who are overweight cross or walk by. Of course that is not the message somebody wanted to convey. What is causing the problem? The word pedestrian is misplaced. What if we say:

CAUTION

PEDESTRIAN

HEAVY TRAFFIC

Did you see the difference? Now there is no doubt: pedestrians are being warned about the dangers of that area because of heavy traffic.



### ACTIVITY

Read the sentences below which were adapted from the same site we've used with the topic Dangling Modifiers: [http://aliscot.com/bigdog/dmmm\\_exercise.htm](http://aliscot.com/bigdog/dmmm_exercise.htm). You can go there to check for more grammar activities if you wish.

1. Mark the sentences with no misplaced modifiers:
  - a. ( ) I almost listened to the whole album.
  - b. ( ) I listened to almost the whole album.
  - c. ( ) He was staring at the girl wearing dark glasses by the vending machine.
  - d. ( ) He was staring at the girl by the vending machine wearing dark glasses.
  - e. ( ) We read that Janet was married in her last letter.
  - f. ( ) In her last letter, we read that Janet was married.
  - g. ( ) The faulty alarm system nearly sounded five times yesterday.
  - h. ( ) The faulty alarm system sounded nearly five times yesterday.
  - i. ( ) On the evening news, I heard that there was a revolution.
  - j. ( ) I heard that there was a revolution on the evening news.

### COMMENTS ON THE ACTIVITY

The misplaced words in sentences a, d, e, g and j brought interpretation problems as we can see here. In sentence A, "almost listened" means that you didn't listen at all. So, the correct answer is B. In sentence D, when it is said "by the vending machine wearing dark glasses", the question is: who was wearing dark glasses? The man? The girl? The vending machine? In this case, dark glasses refer to the girl. So, the correct answer is C. As you can see, misplaced modifiers can bring confusion to the meaning of a sentence. That's why we must avoid

them. I guess you've got the idea, haven't you? If you have any doubts, talk to your teachers and classmates. And remember, be autonomous conducting your own research.

### WRAPPING IT UP...

To wrap it up, misplace modifiers are words or phrases that are put in the wrong place in a sentence causing confusion in the reader/listener. They can be single words as we saw in the sign: HEAVY PEDESTRIAN TRAFFIC, in which the word pedestrian was misplaced causing the wrong idea, and clauses, as in this new example:

Paula could not stop thinking about her dog left alone working at the supermarket.

What is the problem here? The way it is put, the sick dog was working at the supermarket. However, the one who works at the supermarket is Paula and she worries about the sick dog while she is at work. So, the clause left alone working at the supermarket is misplaced in the sentence. The correct form is to put it closer to the subject, Paula:

Working at the supermarket, Paula could not stop thinking about her dog left alone.

Before we finish this class, let's talk about another tricky topic: limiting modifiers. They are a group of words that, as the name says, impose restrictions on the words they modify. When misplaced, they break the flow of communication:

hardly, simply, scarcely, nearly, just, almost, even, merely, only

How can we avoid problems with limiting modifiers? Just do it by using them immediately before the word or words they modify. Example:

Monica has almost finished writing the report we need to send to the office today. (What does it mean? That the report will be finished soon by Monica)

Mr. Santos knew hardly anybody at the conference he has attended in Rio. (There were not many people Mr. Santos knew there)

The adverb ONLY is the one misplaced most often. By changing its position in a sentence, you can change the whole meaning. So, be careful.

Only the girls were singing. (in this case, the boys were not singing)

The girls were only singing. (they were not doing anything else)

Walk on this side of the street only when visiting this part of the town. (put this way, you cannot walk on that side of any streets when visiting other parts of the town)

Walk only on this site of the street when visiting this part of the town. (it is saying that there is a restriction about the side of a particular street in town not all of them).

There are many websites that explain the topics we've studied in this lesson. Do your own research and practice as much as you can. Remember: the more we read and study about a language, the more proficient we get.



### SUMMARY

Class 04 had as its topic: dangling and misplaced modifiers.

In this class, we've worked with the topic: correcting misplaced or dangling modifiers. By doing so, we've reviewed points from previous semesters. The main objective was to help you improve your knowledge about sentence structure so you can write texts that are free from ambiguity. Besides the explanations, we also presented some common situations that might cause doubts as for the use of misplace and dangling modifiers.



### SELF-EVALUATION

Did I increase my knowledge related to Sentence structure?

Can I make correct uses of subject/verb agreement?

Has my knowledge of the English language improved considering the studies and practices of previous semesters?



### NEXT CLASS

Next class, the focus of your studies will be on punctuation. See you then!

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