

22. MODIFICATION ERRORS

In any given sentence, modifiers should be placed as close as possible to the nouns, pronouns, or phrases they modify; sentences that separate modifiers from the things they modify are often unclear and sometimes completely absurd.

Two kinds of modification errors are tested on the SAT:

- 1) Dangling Modifiers
- 2) Misplaced Modifiers

Dangling Modifiers

Dangling modifiers are one of the most frequent errors that appear exclusively in Fixing Sentences. Virtually every section will have at least one and as many as four questions that test your knowledge of them. It is therefore important that you be able to recognize this error quickly and easily.

Sentences that include dangling modifiers are characterized by an introductory clause that describes the subject but does not name it. This clause is always set off from the rest of the sentence by a comma.

Whenever a sentence contains such an introductory clause, the subject must appear immediately after the comma. If the subject does not appear there, the modifier is said to be dangling, and the sentence is incorrect.

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

The first thing we can note about the above sentence is that it contains an introductory clause (*An elementary school teacher from Arkansas*) that does not name the subject – it does not tell us who the elementary school teacher from Arkansas is.

We must therefore ask ourselves whom or what it is referring to. When we look at the rest of the sentence, it is clear that this description can only refer to Bessie Boehm Moore.

The words *Bessie Boehm Moore* do not appear immediately after the comma, so the modifier is dangling.

In order to fix the sentence, we must place Bessie Boehm Moore's name after the comma.

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

One very common SAT trick is to put a possessive version of the subject immediately after the introductory clause. In general, any possessive noun placed immediately after an introductory clause 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.

At first glance, this sentence looks and sounds correct. But who is the elementary school teacher from Arkansas? *Bessie Boehm Moore*, not her *goal*. And here, the *goal* is the subject – not *Bessie Boehm Moore*. The modifier is therefore dangling.

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

When fixing dangling modifiers, it is most important that you identify the subject – the rest of the sentence is not nearly as important – because when you look at the answer choices, you are looking for an option that places the subject immediately after the introductory clause. If the subject is not there, you can immediately eliminate the option.

The presence of a participle, particularly a present participle, at the beginning of a sentence often signals a dangling modifier.

In addition: it is acceptable to begin the main clause with an adjective or adjectives describing the subject because that description is considered part of the complete subject.

In the sentences below, the participles are in bold and the complete subject is underlined.

Present Participle

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

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

Past Participle

Incorrect: **Born** in a small town in Missouri, the majority of singer and actress Josephine Baker's career was spent performing throughout Europe.

Correct: **Born** in a small town in Missouri, singer and actress Josephine Baker spent the majority of her career performing throughout Europe.

In general, dangling modifier answer choices follow a highly predictable pattern. Of five choices, only two will successfully place the subject after the introductory clause and correct the dangling modification; the other three can be eliminated immediately. Of the two that remain, one will be wordy and awkward, and the other will be correct. While it is always a good idea to read both answers, the shorter one will usually be right.

Occasionally, however, you will have no choice but to rearrange the entire sentence. For example:

Correct: The train system stretches from one end of the city to the other and often surprises tourists and city residents with its efficiency.

Correct: The train system, which stretches from one end of the city to the other, often surprises tourists and city residents with its efficiency.

Dangling Modifier Exercises

In the following exercises, identify the subject of each sentence, and rewrite as necessary to eliminate any dangling modifier that appears. Some of the sentences may not contain an error. (Answers p. 173, Official Guide question list p. 149)

1. Characterized by scenes that are shot quickly and in real time, low budgets and simple props are both typical elements of guerilla filmmaking.
2. Located in the southern Andes and covered by glaciers, the most recent eruption of the volcano known as Tronador occurred many centuries ago.
3. Born in St. Lucia in the West Indies, author Derek Walcott's work includes a number of plays and poems, most notably *Omeros*.
4. One of hundreds of islands that form the Indonesian archipelago, the width of Bali is less than 100 miles, yet it holds within its borders a rich and dramatic history.
5. Historically based on the carving of walrus ivory, which was once found in abundance, since the mid-twentieth century Inuit art has also included prints and figures made from soft stone.
6. One of the greatest musicians of her time, Clara Wieck's piano studies began when she was five years old; by the age of twelve she was renowned as both a performer and a composer.
7. Raised in Hong Kong and Shanghai before he moved to the United States in 1935, the buildings designed by I.M. Pei are immediately recognizable because of their characteristic glass exteriors and use of geometrical forms.
8. Projecting an image of pain and brutality that has few parallels among advanced paintings of the twentieth century, *Guernica* was painted by Pablo Picasso in the aftermath of a World War II bombing.
9. Though educated and well mannered, the status of Jane Eyre remains low throughout the majority of the novel that bears her name.
10. Born at Dromoland Castle in County Clare, Ireland in 1821, artist and engineer George O'Brien's aristocratic background seemed at odds with his life in the Australian outback.
11. A member of the ruralism movement, Czech writer Josef Holocek made life in Bohemia one of the principal subjects of his work.
12. Despite winning several architectural awards, the impractical layout of the university's new dormitory has been criticized by students.
13. One of the earliest authorities to take a stand against pollution, it was proclaimed by King Edward I in 1306 that sea coal could not be burned because the smoke it created was hazardous to people's health.
14. Predicting renewed interest in their country's natural resources, a plan has been established by political leaders to create mines in the most underdeveloped regions.
15. Having remained under Moorish rule until the twelfth century, Arabic was still spoken by many Spaniards when their cities first came under the control of European monarchs.

Misplaced Modifiers

Although misplaced modifiers are far less common than dangling modifiers, they do appear from time to time. They may also, in very rare instances, appear in the Error-Identification section.

Unlike dangling modifiers, misplaced modifiers do not necessarily involve introductory clauses and can occur anywhere in a sentence. They do, however, also involve modifiers separated from the words or phrases they are intended to modify and often result in sentences whose meanings are unintentionally ridiculous.

Incorrect: Paul Conrad was a cartoonist known for his political satires that spent nearly three decades on staff at *The Los Angeles Times*.

Even though it's pretty obvious what the sentence is *trying* to say (logically, a satire cannot work at a newspaper), you need to pay close attention to what the sentence is *actually* saying. And what the above sentence is saying is that the **political satires** spent three decades on staff at *The Los Angeles Times*, when it was clearly **Conrad** who spent three decades working at that newspaper.

In order to correct the sentence, we need to make it clear Conrad, not the political satires, worked at the newspaper. There are a number of ways to make this correct, and there is no one structure that the SAT prefers. Below are a variety of structures that correct the misplaced modification in the original sentence.

Correct: Paul Conrad, a cartoonist known for his political satires, spent nearly three decades on staff at *The Los Angeles Times*.

Correct: Paul Conrad, who spent nearly three decades on staff at *The Los Angeles Times*, was a cartoonist known for his political satires,

Correct: Paul Conrad was a cartoonist known for his political satires; he spent nearly three decades on staff at *The Los Angeles Times*.

Correct: Known for his political satires, Paul Conrad spent nearly three decades on staff at *The Los Angeles Times*.

Misplaced Modifier Exercises

In the following sentences, correct any misplaced modification error that occurs. Some of the sentences may not contain an error. (Answers p. 174, Official Guide question list p. 149)

1. The Spanish city of Valencia is the birthplace of horchata, a drink said to date from the eighth century made from the juice of tiger nuts.
2. Claude McKay was one of the most important poets of the Harlem Renaissance that moved to New York after studying agronomy in Kansas.
3. The California Street Cable Railroad is an established public transit company in San Francisco, which was founded by Leland Stanford.
4. Many police officers have switched from patrolling city streets on horseback to patrolling them in cars, which have become the most popular form of urban transportation.
5. Praised by consumer magazines for being both versatile and affordable, the food processor performs a wide range of functions, including chopping, dicing, and pureeing, when flipping a switch.
6. Many ancient cities were protected from bands of invaders by fortresses roaming in search of settlements to plunder.
7. Some of the world's fastest trains run between the cities of Tokyo and Kyoto, which can reach speeds of up to 200 miles per hour.
8. Originally constructed during the Roman Republic, the House of Livia contains brightly colored frescoes dating back to the first decades B.C. that depict bucolic landscapes and mythological scenes.
9. The Georgian port of Batumi fell into decline in the mid-twentieth century, which once housed some of the world's first oil pipelines.
10. The bass viol has experienced a resurgence in popularity over the past several decades resembling the cello.