MODIFIERS: MISPLACED AND DANGLING

Modifiers are words that change other words or phrases in some way: They describe, explain, or amplify something about the word or phrase. Modifiers can be single words—a blue car—or phrases—the car moving down the street. Modifiers work as adjectives (adjectival modifiers) to describe nouns or pronouns: the blue car. They can also work as adverbs to tell when, where, how, or in what manner an action (or verb) happens: She ran quickly or He walks his dog at the same time every night.

MISPLACED MODIFIERS
For ease of reading and understanding, modifiers should be as close to the word or phrase they’re modifying as possible. One common problem arises when the modifier is elsewhere in the sentence, which can cause confusion.

Example:
Motorists slid across the Great Lakes states and into New England as a storm already blamed for three deaths cut visibility and iced over highways.

→ Did the motorists slide “across the Great Lakes states” and slide “into New England?” Or were they from those places?

To correct the confusion that can be caused by a misplaced modifier, a writer usually needs only to move it to another place in the sentence.

Better:
Motorists across the Great Lakes states and into New England slid Sunday....

DANGLING MODIFIERS
Another common problem that can cause confusion is having a modifier in a sentence without any words or phrases it’s actually modifying also in the sentence. We call these modifiers “dangling” because they are not logically joined to the sentence.

Example:
By staying at home and taking care of our children, my wife was able to work, go to school, and build a very successful business.

→ Did the wife stay home, take care of the children, AND go to work, go to school, etc.? Or is there another speaker here who stayed home?

To make a sentence with a dangling modifier read more logically, a writer has to insert the word or phrase being described, which often requires some new wording in the sentence.

Better:
Because I could stay at home and take care of our children, my wife was able to work, go to school, and build a very successful business.