

SEM Education Winter Session

Modifiers

Try to recognize what's funny about this sentence:

After being beaten and deflated, the baker shaped and seasoned the dough.

The sentence is ridiculous because of the comma phrase at the start—it seems like the baker is being beaten before he goes off to work on the dough. *After being beaten and deflated* is called a **modifier** because it modifies or describes someone or something in the same sentence. Here, the modifier is misplaced. Instead, it should go right next to the thing it's supposed to modify:

After being beaten and deflated, the dough was shaped and seasoned by the baker.

A modifier is like a describing phrase. How do you know if a phrase is a modifier? Usually it comes at the beginning of the sentence and is separated off by a comma (but not always). If all you read was *After being beaten and deflated*, your natural thought would be, "**Who** or **What** is being beaten?" Having that thought is how you know you're dealing with a modifier. Without the rest of the sentence, it leaves you wondering what's being talked about. When correcting sentences that have this error, you want to make sure there is a sensible noun that is right next to the modifier.

Let's do a couple examples so you can see how modifiers are tested.

| Example 1 | |
|-----------|---|
| Wrong: | I bought a house from the local bakery made of gingerbread. |
| Correct: | I bought a house made of gingerbread from the local bakery. |

Modifiers don't necessarily have to be at the start of the sentence. Here, *made of gingerbread* should be placed next to the *house* it's describing. Otherwise, it seems like the local bakery is the thing that's made of gingerbread.

| Example 2 | |
|-----------|---|
| Wrong: | Watching the end of the world, our lives flashed before our eyes. |
| Correct: | While we were watching the end of the world, our lives flashed before our eyes. |

In this example, the sentence makes no sense because *our lives* don't have eyes to watch the end of the world with. The modifier *Watching the end of the world* needs to modify *we* even though that word's not even in the sentence. Therefore, the correct version puts in the subject *we* and re-words the sentence.

The phrase *While we were watching the end of the world* is an example of a **dependent clause**, which contains a subject and a verb but can't stand alone as its own complete sentence. Dependent

clauses are NOT modifiers. Note the difference between the wrong and correct versions. The wrong version uses a modifier whereas the correct version uses a dependent clause. Dependent clauses don't leave us wondering *who* or *what* like a modifier does. Reading just the first part of the correct version, we already know the subject is *we*. With dependent clauses, we don't have to worry about modifier errors, because again, they aren't modifiers.

| Rule | |
|--|---|
| Keep modifiers right next to the thing they're supposed to describe. | |
| Example 3 | |
| Wrong: | Running fiercely to the bathroom, John's pants dropped. |
| Correct: | Running fiercely to the bathroom, John dropped his pants. |

Understanding this example is SUPER IMPORTANT. On rare occasions, the SAT will try to trick you by putting the modifier *Running fiercely to the bathroom* right next to *John*. But here, it's not *John* but *John's pants* that's actually being modified. And of course, pants can't by themselves run to the bathroom. So be extremely careful when there's an apostrophe *s*.

| Example 4 | |
|-----------|--|
| Wrong: | Spotted dealing cocaine, the police arrested the drug dealers. |
| Correct: | The police arrested the drug dealers, who were spotted dealing cocaine. |
| Example 5 | |
| Wrong: | Though cooked and seasoned to perfection, the taste of ketchup-covered octopus was revolting. |
| Correct: | Though cooked and seasoned to perfection, the ketchup-covered octopus had a revolting taste. |
| Correct: | The taste of ketchup-covered octopus, though cooked and seasoned to perfection, was revolting. |

In this case, the modifier should modify the food itself, not the *taste* of it.

PRACTICE

1. Having little to no food left, no restaurants were in the area to order from.
 - A) NO CHANGE
 - B) restaurants in the area could not be ordered from.
 - C) the area had no restaurants to order from.
 - D) I could not find any restaurants in the area to order from.

2. Wearing a cloak and top hat, the audience members were dazzled by the magician.
 - A) NO CHANGE
 - B) The audience members, wearing a cloak and top hat, were dazzled by the magician.
 - C) The audience members wearing a cloak and top hat were dazzled by the magician.
 - D) The audience members were dazzled by the magician, wearing a cloak and top hat.

3. Though durable and inexpensive, the purchase of plastic material harms the environment.
 - A) NO CHANGE
 - B) purchasing plastic material
 - C) plastic material
 - D) you should not purchase plastic material because it

4. After missing an easy goal, the crowd booed the soccer player.
 - A) NO CHANGE
 - B) The crowd, after missing an easy goal, booed the soccer player.
 - C) Booing the soccer player, the crowd missed an easy goal.
 - D) After he missed an easy goal, the crowd booed the soccer player.

5. Though skinny and awkward from the outset, Conan's sense of humor made him a television success.
 - A) NO CHANGE
 - B) the sense of humor of Conan
 - C) Conan had a sense of humor that
 - D) sensing Conan's humor

1. D
2. D
3. C
4. D
5. C