

**DEPARTMENT OF AFRICAN AND GENERAL STUDIES  
UDS –WA**

**GEN 101 –LECTURE 3**

**AMBIGUITIES**

A sentence or part of a sentence is ambiguous when it conveys more than one meaning. There are times when an ambiguous meaning is intended by a writer. Sometimes, however, an ambiguous sentence may occur in writing where the writer does not intend it, and the reader is left struggling to decide what or who the writer is referring to.

In many cases ambiguity may be caused by the use of a word which is **homonymous** with another.

- Life depends on the *liver*.

Is *liver* the person who lives it, or the *liver* in the body?

- He lives near the *bank*.

*The bank building, or the bank of the river?*

Ambiguity may be caused by polysemy, i.e. two or more meanings of the same word. Each of the following sentences can have 2 possible interpretations:

- He *may* leave.

This can have two possible interpretations

- a) *It is possible, but not certain, that he will leave.*
- b) *He has my permission to leave.*

- Biting dogs can kill you.

- a) *Dogs that bite can kill you.*
- b) *If you are in the habit of biting dogs, that can kill you.*

**Misplaced modifiers and modifying phrases.**

A common source of ambiguity is the wrong placement of modifiers and modifying phrases. A modifier is a word, phrase or clause that ‘describes’, qualifies, or modifies another word or group of words. A modifier may be

- a) **an adjective:**

*tall* man

*fresh* fruits

Generally, an adjective immediately precedes the noun it modifies. But there are a few exceptions:

Auditor *General*

Inspector *General*

- b) **aprepositional phrase**

the man *in the car*

the students *at the back of the class*

c) **participle phrase:**

the man *sitting in the car*

the woman *lying on the floor*

houses *painted red*

d) **clause:**

the man *who spoke to me*

the house *that he bought*

Unlike adjectives, modifying phrases generally come directly after the word they modify.

- The river *running through the town* is almost dry.
- The goods *that were missing* have been found.
- The seats *at the back* are empty.

Occasionally, a modifying phrase is best located directly before the word it modifies. In the following sentence, the clause '*who was sitting in front of his house*' is a clause modifying the preceding noun 'grandmother'.

- The grandmother *who was sitting in front of his house* saw everything that was going on in the street.

The clause may be changed into a modifying phrase and placed **before** the 'grandmother'.

- *Sitting in front of the house*, the grandmother saw everything that was going on in the street.

Other examples:

- Arriving late at the scene of the robbery*, **the police** were not able to make any arrest.
- Looking around and seeing nobody*, **the children** jumped over the fence into the garden.
- Having completed their assignment*, **the students** rushed out to watch the game.

Note that in all these examples the modifying phrases (*in italics*) are properly attached to the nouns that they modify (**the police, the children, the students,**) by being placed immediately them.

## Misplacing modifiers

If a modifier or a modifying phrase is not properly attached to the word it modifies, it is misplaced, and can cause an ambiguity. Consider this sentence:

- *Driving home this morning*, **the police** stopped me.

Was it the police who was or were driving home? If, as one may guess, it was the writer who was driving home and was stopped by the police, then the modifying phrase (*Driving home this morning*) is misplaced because it is attached to '**the police**'. The sentence should be:

- *Driving home this morning*, **I** was stopped by **the police**.

Other examples of ambiguities cause by misplaced modifiers:

- George couldn't drive to work in his car *with a broken leg*.  
(*with a broken leg*) is misplaced; it seems to modify 'the car' and car cannot have a 'broken leg'..

Revised:

- *With a broken leg*, George couldn't drive to work in his car.
- He shot the man *with a pistol*.

Questions? Did he use a pistol to shoot the man?  
or Did he shoot the man who had a pistol?

**Revised:**

- a) He killed the man who had a pistol.
- b) He used a pistol (not an AK 47) to kill the man?

- The player wore a good luck charm under **his shirt** *which resembled a tiny elephant*.

**Can a shirt resemble an elephant?**

**Revised:**

The player wore a good luck charm *which resembled a tiny elephant* under **his shirt**.  
The player wore under his shirt a good luck charm *which resembled a tiny elephant*.

- The newscaster spoke softly into a tiny microphone wearing a bulletproof vest.

Question: A microphone wearing a bulletproof vest?

Revise the sentence

### iii. **Misplaced restrictors**

A restrictor is a one-word modifier that restricts the meaning of another word or a group of words.

Restrictors include *only, just, almost, merely, nearly, scarcely, simply, even, exactly, hardly*.

Usually a restrictor should come immediately before the word, phrase, or clause it modifies:

- a) *Only John* saw the lion. (i.e. no one else saw it)
- b) John *only* saw the lion. (i.e. he didn't shoot)
- c) John saw *only the lion* (i.e. he did not see the tiger).
- d) An ambiguity or sometimes an absurdity may be created if the restrictor is not properly placed.

- \*At most universities, students *only* get their certificates if they have paid all their bills.
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Revised:

- At most universities, students get their certificates *only if they have paid all their bills*.

- \*We **only** heard it yesterday.
- We heard it **only** yesterday.

- After heating the mixture we *only* observed a slight change in color.
- After heating the mixture we observed *only a slight change* in color.

- I **nearly napped** for *twenty minutes* during the biology lecture.
- I *napped for nearly twenty minutes* during the biology lecture.

#### ***iv. Ambiguity in Pronouns***

Pronouns, especially the personal pronouns (he, she, it, they, etc.) and the demonstratives (this, that, these, those) must be used in a way that they clearly refer to an antecedent noun. When a pronoun is used in such a way that it can apply to more than one antecedent, the result is ambiguity.

- **Mansa** informed **her sister** that *she* would be late for the party.

Question: Who will be late for the party, Mansa or her sister?

**Revised:** Mansa informed her sister that she (Mansa) would be late for the party.

Mansa remarked that her sister would be late for the party.

- After **my father** called **Ali** three times *he* finally came downstairs.

Question: Does he refer to father or Ali?

- **Revised:** After my father called Ali three times, Ali finally came downstairs.

✓ After my father called him three times, Ali finally came downstairs.

#### ***DANGLING MODIFIERS***

Another type of ambiguity can occur when the subject-predicate relationship is not clear. This sometimes happens when there is a misplaced sentence modifier. Consider the following sentences in which the subject in the main clause and the subject in the subordinate clause are the same person.

- a) I was walking towards the hall of residence when I saw him breaking into the car.
- b) As I was walking towards the hall of residence, I saw him breaking into the car.

The subordinate clause can be turned into a modifying clause.

Walking towards the hall of residence, I saw him breaking into the car.

A construction like this makes sense only when the subject in the modifying clause is the same as the subject in the main clause. The person walking towards the hall of residence is the same person who saw the man breaking into the car.

- I was running up the first long hill.
- I felt my nose dripping.

These can be joined into a single sentence by changing the first into subordinate clause:

*While I was running up the hill, I felt my nose dripping.*

With the subordinate clause having the same subject (I) as the main clause, the subordinate can further be reduced into modifying phrase for the subject:

*While running up the hill, I felt my nose dripping.*

*Running up the hill, I felt my nose dripping.*

Note: the following sentence will be wrong because 'my nose' cannot be the subject for 'running up the hill'

\*Running up the hill, my nose began to drip.

### ***Correcting Dangling modifiers***

You correct a sentence with a dangling modifier by supplying a suitable subject or by restructuring the sentence. Examples of sentences with dangling modifiers and their revisions.

**Dangling:** *Feeling feverish, a visit to the doctor seemed the best thing to do.*

**Revised:** Feeling feverish, **he** thought he had better see a doctor.

**Dangling:** *Riding my bicycle, a dog chased me.* (Who was riding the bicycle?)

**Revised:** Riding my bicycle, I was chased by a dog.

When I was riding my bicycle, a dog chased me.

A dog chased me as I was riding my bicycle.

**Dangling:** After doing my homework, the dog was fed.

**Revised:** After I had done my homework, I fed the dog.

After doing my homework, I fed the dog.

**Dangling:** Sitting under the tree, *the cool breeze* from the sea soon made me fall asleep.

**Question:** *Was the cool breeze sitting under the tree?*

**Revised:** As I sat under the tree, the cool breeze from the sea soon made me fall asleep.

Sitting under the tree and enjoying the cool breeze from the sea, I soon fell asleep.

**Dangling:** Driving through the town, several damaged buildings were noticed.

**Question:** *Who was driving through the town?*

**Revised:**

Driving through the town, we noticed several damaged buildings.

When we were driving through the town, we noticed several damaged buildings.

When we drove through the town, we noticed several damaged buildings.

**Dangling:** **While** riding to town this morning *my helmet* fell off.

*Was the helmet riding?*

**Revised:** While I was riding to town this morning, my helmet fell off.

My helmet fell off while I was riding to town this morning.

### **Practice: Correcting dangling modifiers/phrases**

1. Being made of glass, I handled the tabletop carefully.
2. Driving along at top speed, the road took an unexpected turn to the left.
3. On receiving the news, tears filled his mother's eyes.
4. To be completely immune to polio, several inoculations may be necessary.
5. To find out why the wheel shakes, the car must be driven over 50 miles an hour.
6. While walking to my chemistry final, a dog nipped my leg.

7. By being overtaxed, the government is making the people poorer.
8. After considering the offer carefully, it was refused.
9. He was riding without a helmet and while approaching the barrier the police stopped him.

**EXERCISE Revising dangling modifiers**

1. While walking to my chemistry final, a dog nipped my leg.
2. By being overtaxed, the government is making the people poorer.
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**EXERCISE- Combining sentences- Use the italicized sentence as a modifier**

*I was painting our house last week.*

I fell off the ladder and broke my leg.

*While painting our house last week* I fell off the ladder and broke my leg.

- 1) *I was chopping wood last summer.*

I cut my foot.

- 2) *Harriet was eager to see catch the bus to Wa.*

She got up at 3:30 a.m.

- 3) The child stood mute

The child was *toofrightened to utter a word.*