

NOUN MODIFIERS CAN MODIFY SLIGHTLY FAR AWAY NOUN

INTRODUCTION

Noun modifiers, as the name suggests, modify noun entities. They are generally placed as close to the noun entity they modify as possible to avoid any ambiguity in modification. This is necessary for the sentence to convey the logical intended meaning.

In practice, placing the modifier “as close to the noun entity as possible” has become placing the modifier “immediately after the noun entity” they modify. Now most of the times, this practice helps us arrive at the correct answer choice. However, this does not mean that a “noun modifier” should ALWAYS modify the immediately preceding noun. There are several instances in which a “noun modifier” modifies slightly far away noun.

However, since test takers blindly follow this practice or rule, they eliminate answer choices if they see that it does not make sense for the “noun modifier” to modify the immediately preceded noun. And in certain instances this may result in elimination of a correct answer choice. If you have experienced this while solving SC questions, then this article will be an eye-opener one for you.

Following are the two [OFFICIAL EXAMPLES OF CORRECT SENTENCES](#) in which the “noun modifiers” do not modify the immediately preceding noun. They actually modify the noun that is placed slightly far away

1: [Emily Dickinson’s letters](#) to Susan Huntington Dickinson, [which](#) were written over a period beginning a few years before Susan’s marriage to Emily’s brother and ending shortly before Emily’s death in 1886, outnumber her letters to anyone else. ([OG 13#29](#), Choice E)

In this sentence, the noun modifier “which were written...” correctly modifies slightly far away noun – “letters”. It does not modify immediately preceding noun “Susan”.

2: Although she had been known as an effective legislator first in the Texas Senate and later in the United States House of Representatives, Barbara Jordan did not become a nationally recognized figure until 1974, when she participated in the [hearings](#) on the impeachment of President Richard Nixon, [which](#) were televised nationwide. (GMAT Prep, Choice B)

In this sentence, the noun modifier “which were televised...” correctly modifies slightly far away noun – “hearings”. It does not modify immediately preceding noun “Nixon” or “impeachment”.

HOW FAR AWAY MODIFICATION MAKES SENSE

The above two sentences confirm that GMAC accepts the usage of “noun modifiers” modifying a slightly far away noun. This usage is not uncommon in OG and GMAT Prep SC problems. So let’s see how it makes sense for the “noun modifier” to modify a noun that does precede it.

Simple Example

Let’s start with simple sentences to understand the working behind this usage:

1. The committee chose Mr. Smith, who was the most experienced member, to lead all the management-related operations.

Needless to say that in this sentence, the relative pronoun “who”, a “noun modifier”, modifies the immediately preceding noun “Mr. Smith”. The relative pronoun clause is giving some extra information about “Mr. Smith”, the entity it modifies.

2. The committee chose Mr. Smith of Left Block, who was the most experienced member, to lead all the management-related operations.

Many of you will right away discard this sentence as “incorrect” because “who” is not preceded by “Mr. Smith”, the noun it should logically refer to. Well, this sentence is absolutely correct. There is no modification error here. Here “who” correctly modifies “Mr. Smith”.

This is so because the newly added prepositional phrase “of Left Block” is a modifier that modifies “Mr. Smith”. So it is placed next to that entity. This prepositional cannot be placed elsewhere in the sentence without violating the structure and the meaning of the sentence. So now instead of just “Mr. Smith” in sentence 1, we have a “noun phrase” in sentence 2 – “Mr. Smith of Left Block”. In this scenario, “who” has the liberty to jump over the preceding preposition phrase (modifier) to modify the HEAD of this noun phrase – “Mr. Smith”

Additionally, “who was the ...” cannot logically and grammatically modify the immediately preceding noun – Left Block.

Complex Example

- The National Association of Large Distribution Businesses, known as Anged, appealed to the Supreme Court in Madrid, which then asked the Court of Justice for a ruling on how to apply European law covering working times.

This is a sentence taken from an article in nytimes.com. In this sentence, the relative pronoun “which” is correctly modifying “Supreme Court” even though it is preceded by a noun entity “Madrid”. This modification is absolutely ‘sensical’ because the prepositional phrase “in Madrid” cannot be placed anywhere in the sentence without violating the structure and the meaning of the sentence. In this case, we now have noun phrase “Supreme Court in Madrid” and hence, “which” has the liberty to jump over the immediately preceding prepositional phrase (modifier) to modify the head of this noun phrase – “Supreme Court”.

Again, logically it will not make sense for “which” to modify “Madrid”. “Madrid” is a place that will require “where” to modify it.



Here we will discuss the correct sentences of the two official problems that we mentioned in the beginning of the article and will see how in both the sentences the noun modifier modifies the noun entity that is not placed immediately before it.

[OG 13#29](#)

1: **Emily Dickinson’s letters** to Susan Huntington Dickinson, **which** were written over a period beginning a few years before Susan’s marriage to Emily’s brother and ending shortly before Emily’s death in 1886, outnumber her letters to anyone else.

Let us quickly get the meaning of this sentence. This sentence talks about ED’s letters to her sister in law SHD. These letters that were written over a period starting from a few years before Susan’s marriage to Emily’s brother and ending shortly before Emily’s death outnumber Emily’s letters to anyone else.

Now let's analyze the modifier. In this sentence, relative pronoun “which” correctly modifies “letters”, a noun entity that is not placed immediately before “which”. Now “letters” is followed by a prepositional phrase “to SHD” that modifies the “letters”. It tells us who the letters were written to. This prepositional phrase cannot be placed elsewhere in the sentence. So we have a big noun phrase preceding “which” – “ED’s letters to SHD”. In this case, “which” has the liberty to jump over “to SHD” and modify the head of the big noun phrase. This modification leads to no ambiguity at all.

Furthermore logically and grammatically it does not make sense to say that SHD was written over a period... Thus, the closest noun cannot be modified by this modifier.

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2: Although she had been known as an effective legislator first in the Texas Senate and later in

the United States House of Representatives, Barbara Jordan did not become a nationally recognized figure until 1974, when she participated in the **hearings** on the impeachment of President Richard Nixon, **which** were televised nationwide.

As always, let's begin with the meaning first. This sentence talks about Barbara Jordan. She was known as an effective legislator first in Texas Senate and then in US House of Representatives. However, she became nationally recognized figure in 1974, when she participated in the hearings on the impeachment of President Nixon. These hearing were televised all across the nation.

Now it's time to understand the role of the modifier. In this sentence, we have two relative pronouns. The first relative pronoun "when" modifies the preceding noun "1974". However, the second relative pronoun "which" does not follow the suit.

The sentence says that Jordan participated in "hearings". What were these hearing about? These hearings were on the impeachment of President Nixon. The prepositional phrase "on the impeachment" modifies "the hearings" while "of President Nixon" modifies "the impeachment". The modifiers appear after the entities (all nouns) they modify. Hence, together we have a huge noun phrase "the hearings on the impeachment of President Richard Nixon".

Note that none of these prepositional phrases can be placed anywhere else in the sentence. So here, "which" comfortably jumps over both the prepositional phrases to modify "the hearings", an absolutely acceptable usage.

Both the above examples explain how the relative pronouns can modify a slightly far away noun. The thing to keep in mind is that this rule is applicable to all noun modifiers. Following is an example of another GMAT Prep problem in which in the correct answer choice, verb-ing modifier modifies a far-away noun.

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3: Like the **great navigators** who first sailed around the Earth **gathering** information about its size and the curvature of its surface, astronomers have made new observations that show with startling directness the large-scale geometry of the universe. (Choice D)

After reading this one, almost all of you will say that "gathering" is a verb-ing modifier that is placed after "Earth" and is not preceded by a comma. Hence, it must modify "Earth". This modification makes no sense because Earth dis not gather information. The great navigators did. This sentence is incorrect. BUT IN REALITY, this sentence is absolutely correct. Here is why.

Structurally, "who first sailed around the Earth" is a clause. Here "who" stands for "the great navigators". Now together "the great navigators who first sailed around the Earth" is a big noun phrase (refer to the mini article on noun phrases and Noun modifiers).

Many of you may argue that this entity contains a "who clause". How can we classify as a noun phrase. We can classify this as a noun phrase since it has a noun at its head. It is of the

construction – Noun + Clause.

The head of this big noun phrase is “the great investigators”. Now the “who” clause that modifies “the great investigators” cannot be placed anywhere else in the sentence. This gives “gathering”, a noun modifier, the liberty to jump over the preceding modifier and modify the head – “the great investigators”. Hence, “gathering” in this sentence is correctly modifying “the great investigators”.

Furthermore, logically “earth” cannot gather information.

WHEN FAR AWAY MODIFICATION IS NOT POSSIBLE

So now we know that noun modifiers not only can modify the immediate preceding noun but also can modify a slightly far-away noun. The modification completely depends on the context and the structure of the sentence. However, there can be instances where such modification will not be possible. In such cases, a noun modifier cannot jump over preceding modifiers to refer to the head of the noun phrases.

Let’s take a few examples:

Simple Example

Let’s bring back the simple example that we discussed earlier. In this example, it makes sense for the “noun modifier” to modify a slightly far-away noun.

1. The committee chose **Mr. Smith** of Left Block, **who** was the most experienced member, to lead all the management-related operations.

We have already seen how “who” correctly modifies “Mr. Smith” in this sentence. Compare this with the following sentence:

2. The committee chose Mr. Smith in **the last meeting**, **who** was the most experienced member, to lead all the management-related operations.

If you notice, structurally there is no difference between sentences 1 and 2. In both, “Mr. Smith” is followed by prepositional phrase. However, the second sentence is not correct. Here “who” ends up modifying immediately preceding noun “the last meeting”, resulting in modifier error.

This is so because “in the last meeting” does not modify “Mr. Smith”. It rather modifies the action “chose”. When did the committee choose? It did in the last meeting. This prepositional phrase can actually be placed right in the beginning of the sentence, after “The committee”, or before “Mr. Smith” to convey the intended meaning. Hence, here “who” cannot jump over the preceding noun. Notice how per the context of this sentence, the expression “Mr. Smith in the last meeting” is not a noun phrase.

Contrast this with the noun phrase in the original sentence “Mr. Smith of Left Block”.

EXERCISE

Here is a small exercise for all our readers. Analyze the following two sentences and tell us which one is correct and which one is not and give reasons for the same.

1. The decision of the European leaders to use the Continent’s bailout funds to recapitalize struggling banks would provide help to banks without directly adding to the sovereign debt of countries, which has been a problem for Spain and potentially for Italy.

2: The decision of the European leaders to use the Continent’s bailout funds to recapitalize struggling banks would provide help to banks without directly adding to the sovereign debt in the coming months, which has been a problem for Spain and potentially for Italy.



Take Away

1. Noun modifiers must be placed as close as possible to the entities they modify to convey clearly the intended logical meaning of the sentence.
2. When the context and the structure of the sentence allow, noun modifiers can jump over preceding modifier to refer to a slightly far-away placed noun.



- **That noun modifiers can modify a slightly far away noun has been covered in our concept named “Modifiers – Relative Pronouns”.**
- **We teach the application of this rule set in details in our Live Session “SC-4 Modifiers 1” with more examples.**