

5.1. Prepositional Phrases as modifiers

Prepositional phrase: A *prepositional phrase* begins with a *preposition* (such as *in*, *on*, *at*, *between*, *among*; refer section 2.1.6 on prepositions) and ends with a noun, pronoun, or gerund. Some examples of *prepositional phrases* are: *on the top*, *beneath the desk*, *in the car*, *by the side* etc.

Recommendation: As is generally recommended for all modifiers, *prepositional phrase* should be placed as close as possible to what the *prepositional phrase* is trying to modify.

Incorrect placement of *prepositional phrase* in a sentence often leads to sentences that are either ambiguous or illogical. Let's take an example:

Martin Luther King drafted an impassioned defense of his use of nonviolent actions against racial discrimination in an Alabama prison cell.

Notice that the prepositional phrase *in an Alabama prison cell* is located close to *racial discrimination* and hence, seems to modify it. This leads to an *illogical* interpretation that King defended the racial discrimination, which occurred in Alabama prison cell. However, the intent of the sentence obviously is that King's defense (of his use of nonviolent actions against racial discrimination) was drafted in Alabama prison cell. Hence, the correct sentence would be:

In an Alabama prison cell, Martin Luther King drafted an impassioned defense of his use of nonviolent actions against racial discrimination.

A sentence based on official question (#49, OG-13: *The automotive conveyor-belt system*,...):

University of Georgia's efforts to decrease waste in landfills, by using solar-powered waste reduction stations have reduced from 30 hours per week to only 2.5 hours per week the time required to collect and transport materials.

Analysis: This sentence creates an ambiguous meaning, due to placement of the *prepositional phrase*: *from 30 hours per week to only 2.5 hours per week*. In the sentence, it is not very clear whether:

(a) *University of Georgia's efforts* have reduced from 30 hours per week to 2.5 hours per week

Or

(b) *The time required to collect and transport materials* has reduced from 30 hours per week to 2.5 hours per week

Clearly the intent is to convey that the *time required to collect and transport materials* has reduced from 30 hours per week to 2.5 hours per week. However, the way the original sentence is structured, lends itself to an ambiguous interpretation. We fix this by positioning the modifier *the time required to collect and transport materials* immediately after the verb *reduced*; the prepositional phrase: *from 30 hours per week to only 2.5 hours per week* now correctly modifies *the time required to collect and transport materials*, thereby making it very clear that the time required to collect and transport materials has reduced from 30 hours per week to 2.5 hours per week:

University of Georgia's efforts to decrease waste in landfills, by using solar-powered waste reduction stations have reduced the time required to collect and transport materials from 30 hours per week to only 2.5 hours per week.

Another sentence based on official question (#122, OG-13: *A firm that specializes in the analysis of handwriting,..*):

Child psychologists believe from childhood to adulthood that in a child's growing up years, each stage of development is crucial to shape the personality of the child.

Analysis: Because of the incorrect placement of the prepositional phrase *from childhood to adulthood*, this sentence seems to *illogically* suggest that *child psychologists* believe *from childhood to adulthood*. Clearly the intent is to convey that in a child's growing up years, each stage of development from childhood to adulthood is crucial to shape the personality of the child. We fix it by positioning the prepositional phrase *from childhood to adulthood* next to *each stage of development*:

Child psychologists believe that in a child's growing up years, each stage of development from childhood to adulthood is crucial to shape the personality of the child.

Another sentence based on official question (GMATPrep: *In A.D. 391, resulting from the destruction of the largest library of the ancient....*):

During the 150-year period between 1250 BCE and 1100 BCE, a very prolonged period of reduced precipitation caused severe droughts and mass migration, ending the most advanced civilization of the ancient world in the middle East.

Analysis: Because of the incorrect placement of the prepositional phrase *of the ancient world in the middle East*, this sentence seems to *illogically* suggest as if the sentence is referring to *ancient world in the middle East* (as if there was an *ancient world in the middle East*, another *ancient world in the West*, another *ancient world in the North*, and so on). However, clearly the intent is to convey that the civilization in the middle East was the most advanced of the ancient world. We fix it by positioning the prepositional phrase *in the middle East* next to *civilization*:

During the 150-year period between 1250 BCE and 1100 BCE, a very prolonged period of reduced precipitation caused severe droughts and mass migration, ending the civilization in the middle East, the most advanced of the ancient world.

Prepositional phrases at the beginning of a clause

It should be noted that in sentences that *start* with a prepositional phrase (as is the case above, where prepositional phrase *in an Alabama prison cell* starts the sentence/clause), the prepositional phrase generally modifies the *action (verb)* of the clause that follows this prepositional phrase.

It should be noted that because these prepositional phrases modify the *verb* (of the clause that follows this prepositional phrase), these prepositional phrases are *Adverbial* modifiers (remember *Adverbs* generally modify *verbs*; refer to section 2.1.5) and hence, answer the questions *how*, *when*, *where*, *how much* and *why*.

Let's again look at the following sentence:

In an Alabama prison cell, Martin Luther King drafted an impassioned defense of his use of nonviolent actions against racial discrimination.

So, in the above sentence, the prepositional phrase *in an Alabama prison cell* modifies *drafted*, the *action/verb* of the clause that follows this prepositional phrase. In other words this sentence conveys *where* the defense was *drafted*: *in an Alabama prison cell*.