

# Bracken Business Communications Clinic

## MISPLACED PHRASES

Often, extra words or phrases modify the meaning of a primary word or clause, answering questions of Why? Which one? When? and How? These modifiers usually have to be near the primary word(s). Otherwise, misinterpretation can occur.

Occasionally some modifiers do not work with the rest of the sentence because they are in the wrong place (too far from the word/phrase they modify) and/or are ambiguous.

- Ambiguous preposition phrases:

**Example:** At the mountain pass, I saw a girl with binoculars.

What is the meaning of this sentence for you? Is it a. or b. (below)? Or is it both? This sentence is ambiguous!

- a. I was using binoculars to see, and by this way I observed a girl.
- b. I observed a girl who was wearing/using binoculars.

- Ambiguous reduced adverb clauses:

**Example:** While getting up, the alarm clock went off again.

>Incorrect: Grammatically, here, it is the alarm clock who is getting up. The subject of the main clause (alarm clock) becomes the implicit subject of the reduced adverbial clause (while getting up). If the explicit and the implicit subjects are not the same, the sentence does not make sense.

To fix this, you can add a subject to the introductory clause, “While **I** was getting up, the alarm clock went off again.”

Example: While drinking coffee, I had a cookie.

>Correct: Grammatically, the interpretation is, “I had a cookie, and I was drinking coffee.” The implicit and the explicit subjects match.

- Misplaced relative clauses

**Example:** The hiker met a grizzly bear who was having lunch.

Who was having lunch? The hiker? Or the bear? The “bear” interpretation comes to mind easier. However, is this what the sentence really tries to mean? Do bears eat lunch? How do we know which meal of the day they are eating? It is likely that the hiker was the one having lunch.

To fix this, move the relative clause next to the primary word that it modifies, “The hiker who was having lunch met a grizzly bear.”