

Grammar Corner

Misplaced and Dangling Modifiers, and How to Avoid Them

By Roger Gilmartin

A modifier is a word or phrase that modifies a sentence to make the meaning more clear or specific. An example of a sentence with no modifier is *I love this car*. If you say *I love this blue car*, then the word *blue* is a modifier because it tells us what kind of car you like.

Modifiers can also be incorrectly or poorly placed and give a sentence an unintended meaning. These are called misplaced and dangling modifiers.

Misplaced Modifiers

A misplaced modifier is a word or phrase that doesn't modify the intended noun. One of the most common examples is the placement of the word *only*. For example:

Bill only eats organic food.

Sarah only plays one musical instrument.

Bob only likes team sports.

The placement of *only* in each sentence modifies the verb instead of the noun. The first sentence says the only thing Bill does with organic food is eat it. But the intended meaning is he eats organic food and no other kind of food. The second sentence means to say Sarah plays a single musical instrument, so *only* should go after *plays*. In the third sentence, *only* is supposed to modify *team sports* and should be moved after *likes*. A good method for determining the placement of the modifier is to ask whether it is modifying the verb or the noun, then place the modifier accordingly.

Limiting modifiers should come directly before the word they modify. The word *nearly*, for example, can be misplaced and alter a sentence's meaning.

These sentences show how:

Steve nearly lost \$10,000 betting on poker.

Steve lost nearly \$10,000 betting on poker.

In the first sentence, Steve came close, but didn't lose his money. *Nearly* modifies *lost* in

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Italics? No, Gracias



Diversity, Inclusion & Sensitivity

By Lourdes Venard

Writers and Editors Push Back Against a CMOS Rule

Sometimes, copyeditors get stuck on style “rules.” But these rules are meant to be flexible—even the editors of *The Chicago Manual of Style* have made this point, writing in some editions: “Rules and regulations such as these ... cannot be endowed with the fixity of rock-ribbed law. They are meant for the average case, and must be applied with a certain degree of elasticity.”

One entry that may require elasticity is CMOS 7.53, which advises to use italics for isolated words and phrases from another language unless they appear in a standard English-language dictionary.

Many fiction authors, especially Latinx writers in the United States, have been pushing back on this directive in recent years. The practice of italicizing words in fiction furthers the othering of people who speak more than one language and who may switch back and forth between languages in conversation.

This pushback first gained steam in the late 1990s, when writer Junot Díaz persuaded the *New Yorker*, which has published his short stories, and later his book publishers. Díaz, in an interview with *The New York Times*, said: “I took extreme pains for my book to not be a native informant. Not: ‘This is Dominican food. This is a Spanish word.’ I trust my readers, even non-Spanish ones.”

Other authors took up the cause, including fantasy and YA author Daniel José Older, who made that point eight years ago in this humorous [video](#). “The function of language is to communicate things clearly. The function of grammar and rules around language are to facilitate that communication,” he said in the video.

Raquel V. Reyes, who writes the Caribbean Kitchen Mystery series,

seasons her dialogue with Spanish, such as in this line: “Kids? No me digas—You’re pregnant?”

It was very much intentional for her not to italicize those words. In an essay for *Writer’s Digest*, she wrote: “I will not allow the Spanish in my stories to be italicized. My Latinx characters speak in two languages—sometimes within a single sentence. They do not stop, change voices, and then say the words. ... It is important (dare I say, my mission) to normalize languages other than English in literature for English-speaking-dominate markets. Anything less perpetuates the myth that one language is superior to the hundreds of other languages spoken in the U.S.”

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While this movement gained steam among writers, it took more time for some publishers to accept this change. In 2021, *The Gettysburg Review*, a recognized literary journal, tweeted: “...just a heads up that we are no longer by default italicizing non-English words. It’s both othering and

unnecessary, and we apologize for taking so long.”

Even CMOS has bent on this. In 2020, editor Russell Harper, in [CMOS Shop Talk](#), gave authors and editors permission to *not* italicize such words in fiction, writing: “The problem with using italics for non-English words in fiction is that italics will draw attention to those words in a way that can make them seem mannered or inauthentic. Ernest Hemingway (or his editor) understood this a long time ago.”

Harper goes on to give an example from *The Sun Also Rises*, originally published in 1926. Hemingway drops in Spanish words without italicizing. So this is a practice that goes back almost a hundred years.

Benjamin Dreyer, copy chief at Random House and author of *Dreyer’s English: An Utterly Correct Guide to*

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"Editing is a crucial way in which we collaboratively build more just futures."

– Dr. Cathy Hannabach

"Freelancers often swoop in to save the day. But what's the billing rate for 'heroism'?"

– Cecilia Tan

"I have come to understand that there are many different, and often unexpected, ways to succeed in publishing."

– Ran Walker

EFACON 2023 Keynote Speakers

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fiction/fantasy), as well as an award-winning novelist and short story writer. She has edited books and anthologies for numerous publishers ranging from the *Baseball Prospectus* annual (Wiley) to *Sex In The System* (Carroll & Graf), and was inducted in 2010 into the GLBT Writers and Editors Hall of Fame at the Saints & Sinners Literary Festival. When she's not writing or editing something in her home office, she can be found writing and editing while traveling the world.

Ran Walker is the award-winning author of thirty books. His writing has appeared in a various anthologies and periodicals and he has been specializing in flash fiction and microfiction—stories averaging 50 to 100 words—since 2019. Prior to becoming

a writer and educator, he worked in magazine publishing and practiced law in Mississippi.

Ran teaches creative writing at Hampton University and for *Writer's Digest* University. He is also a contributing editor at *Writer's Digest*, where he freelances regularly. A member of the National Novel Writing Month's Writers Board, Ran lives in Virginia with his wife and daughter.

Offering a rare opportunity for solopreneurs, the Editorial Freelancers Association Conference is a gathering where freelance editors, proofreaders, literary coaches, researchers, writers, and other editorial professionals can engage in networking, professional development, and camaraderie. EFACON 2023 is

expected to draw hundreds of editorial freelancers from across North America and abroad.

"We are finally going to be able to gather in-person for EFACON 2023 for networking, learning, and growth," says Katy Grenfell, EFA co-executive. "We are aiming for BIG fun, starting with our excellent group of keynote speakers. I think they are going to bring this convention to the next level."

For more information and to register for EFACON 2023, visit eventleaf.com/e/EFACON2023.

Italics? No, Gracias

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Clarity and Style, echoes this sentiment: "Let's say you're writing a novel in which the characters shimmy easily between English and, say, Spanish. Consider not setting the Spanish (or what-have-you) in italics. Use of italics emphasizes foreignness. If you mean to suggest easy fluency, use of roman normalizes your text."

He goes on to say: "On the other hand, if you're writing a novel about, say, an isolated young

Englishwoman living in Paris who is confounded by the customs, the people, and the language, it would certainly make good sense to set all the bits of French she encounters, in narration or in dialogue, in the requisite italics. You want that French to feel, every time, strange."

Editing is always about making a series of judgment calls—and those judgment calls should take into account whether the text is being inclusive of all people.

Next time you come across italics in non-English words, take a second to consider whether they are really needed.

Lourdes Venard has more than 35 years of writing and editing experience. She also teaches copyediting through the University of California, San Diego certificate program and through EFA.

Contributors' Notes

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