

## Stacked Modifiers

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### Overview

What is a modifier?

A modifier, essentially, adds context to a noun. Modifiers can be single words, hyphenated phrases, or descriptive phrases. They can incorporate adjectives, adverbs, and/or nouns.

### Modifiers in Action

Modifiers can offer detail, clarity, and style. However, too many modifiers can sacrifice clarity and concision. Effective writing aims to balance these qualities. Consider the following examples:

“Native Connecticutian, military general, and infamous traitor to the American Revolutionary cause, Benedict Arnold, enjoyed strawberry preserves on his morning toast.”

(N.B. There is no evidentiary proof that Arnold enjoyed strawberry preserves. This is merely an example of a grammar concept.)

These phrases describe Benedict Arnold and work stylistically to paint a fuller biographical picture. However, as shown in the example, a long list of phrases can distract from the sentence itself and inhibit clarity.

“We developed an efficient small-scale rural pilot water reduction program to address irrigation concerns.”

The writer used five different modifiers to explain their project. While all of these modifiers might be relevant to the description of this program, in this stacked format, it is very difficult for the reader to understand the precise nature of the program. This is in part because, in this structure, the reader cannot determine if the modifiers are all modifying the program, or if they modify other descriptors. For example, does small-scale refer to the program size or to the rural area in which it is located? Moreover, the writer also includes a double-word modifier--small-scale--within this long series of modifiers, which also contributes to the reader’s confusion.

“The almost-but-not-quite-dead-once-verdant-now-brown plant may still be salvageable.”

Here, the writer links a series of modifiers with hyphens to describe their plant and their hopes for its resurrection. In this case, this “monster modifier,” to borrow a term used by Bonnie Mills of Grammar Girl, dominates the sentence while simultaneously reducing the significance of the individual modifiers.

## How to Use Modifiers Effectively

There are several ways to effectively incorporate modifiers without bogging down your text and confusing your reader. A good rule of thumb is to limit the use of modifiers to a maximum of for each noun or verb.

“The man approached the dark, stagnant, low-level tidal marsh infested with mosquitoes.”

This is a mouthful. You could consider the following options to improve this sentence:

**Use hyphens:** “...the dark, stagnant, mosquito-infested low-level tidal marsh.”

Just remember that hyphens only apply to modifiers that come before the noun. Also, the same rule of thumb applies to hyphenated modifiers. Two to three can work but anything more adds confusion.

**Eliminate redundant or less-important modifiers:** “...the dark, stagnant tidal marsh.”

**Break up the sentence:** “The man approached the dark, stagnant tidal marsh. It was infested with mosquitoes.”

## Practice Exercises

Read the following sentences and determine if they follow best practices for incorporating modifiers. If not, correct them while maintaining their original meaning.

1. The larger-than-life statue stared menacingly at the young museum-goer.
2. The book was a heart-pounding, page-turning, finger-trembling whale-of-a-good-time mystery.
3. Khamis purchased a high-velocity turbo-powered German-engineered all-wheel-drive commercial bus.
4. The antiquated-but-nonetheless-critical scholarship on Kilwa Kisiwani demonstrates the transcontinental impact of the important historical regional connections in African history.
5. The poet reminisced about his childhood as he meandered the quiet and quaint tree-lined suburban sidewalks of East Rock.
6. The six-foot two-hundred-pound flame-throwing left-handed Cy-Young award-winning starting pitcher took the mound.

7. The twenty-eight-year-old woman wondered about her decision to attend another Zoom departmental meeting.

8. The soon-to-be graduate bought his cap and gown.

9. This report examines the efficacy of spontaneous hands-on arts-and-crafts hours on child-rearing.

10. This bakery specializes in sugar-free, gluten-free, vegan chocolate chip cookies.

**Sources:**

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