

WORD COUNT WRITERS TALK ABOUT WRITING**Adverb Placement, Generally and Specifically**

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Recently, I came across a version of this sentence in a client document:

ABC Corp. hired XYZ Co. exclusively for testing multiple simulations in order to find the best solution.

Did ABC Corp. hire just XYZ Co. or did it hire XYZ Co. just for testing? Although the sentence is grammatical, the meaning is ambiguous absent further context.

The general rule is adverbs should be placed next to the thing they modify. *Only* gets a lot of attention on this front. Lots of usage writers, [myself included](#), talk about how the position of *only* in a sentence is vital to clarity of meaning.

There's truth in that statement, a truth that is realized in my example sentence, even though we're dealing with *exclusively* instead of *only*. However, as I've learned since writing that article, there's more to the story.

Defining Terms

Only and *exclusively* are part of a category of adverbs called focusing modifiers. These modifiers focus the meaning of the word modified. *Only* and *exclusively* restrict meaning, making them restrictive adverbs. Terms like *also* and *too* add meaning to the modified term, making them additive modifiers. (There are other kinds of focusing modifiers, but I'll cover just additive and restrictive here.)

Some of the most common additive/restrictive adverbs include:

alone	else	just	purely
also	especially	merely	simply
as well	even	only	solely
at least	exactly	particularly	too
but	exclusively	precisely	wholly

Positioning Additive/Restrictive Adverbs

It's true that the general position for an additive/restrictive adverb is right next to the word it modifies, either before or after it, depending on the specific adverb. Doing so limits ambiguity, though not completely, as we've seen. The problem is that following this rule strictly can result in stiff, unnatural-sounding language, something few readers value.

Play me a song only.

In this example, *only* modifies *song* and sits next to it, where the general rule says it should. But who talks like that?

Fortunately, focus modifiers can occupy an idiomatic position as well, one that's not adjacent to the term it modifies. We can put additive/restrictive adverbs:



1. **Immediately following the subject of the sentence when the adverb modifies the whole sentence.** *The boys only hiked 3 of the 10 miles.* If you put *only* in front of the subject, it will modify just the subject: *Only the boys hiked 3 of the 10 miles they were supposed to.*
2. **Between the auxiliary and main verb when modifying the whole verb phrase.** *The boys have only been hiking an hour, while the girls have been hiking for three hours.*
3. **Between the auxiliary and main verb when modifying something later in the sentence.** *The boys will only receive credit for the miles they actually hiked.* Here, *only* modifies *for the miles they actually hiked*.

Additive/restrictive adverbs most often modify a word or phrase rather than an entire clause. As a result, they appear more often in the middle of the sentence. The result is a more natural-sounding sentence, though again we have to be wary of ambiguity.

This rule is true even in formal writing, such as academics, and for all of the additive/restrictive adverbs to at least some degree. But *only* is the one that gets singled out. It's discussed most often and does have position restrictions, as we've seen. So too do *alone*, *also*, *too*, and others. For example, *alone* can be positioned far from the subject it modifies: *Tom carried the boxes alone.*

Watching Out for Ambiguity

Most usage writers who accepted nonadjacent positions for additive/restrictive adverbs make an important point: be alert for ambiguity. In fact, whether an adverb is adjacent to the thing it modifies or not, we should ensure there is no ambiguity in meaning. Balanced with that is writing a sentence that sounds natural.

When you come across an adverb that is ambiguous or awkward, try moving it around. In our first example sentence, we have several options:

- ABC Corp. hired exclusively XYZ Co. for testing.
- ABC Corp. exclusively hired XYZ Co. for testing.
- ABC Corp. hired XYZ Co. for testing exclusively.

The first and second sentences tell us that ABC Corp. hired only XYZ Co., but both sound stilted. The third tells us that XYZ Co. was hired only to do the testing. It too sounds stilted. Fortunately for me, both facts were true: ABC Corp. hired only XYZ Co. and only to do testing. The original sentence gives an accurate meaning and sounds natural.

Pay attention to adverb placement, but remember that the right place need not be next to the term being modified.

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