



Framework #3:

[Main Sentence, Descriptive Phrase]

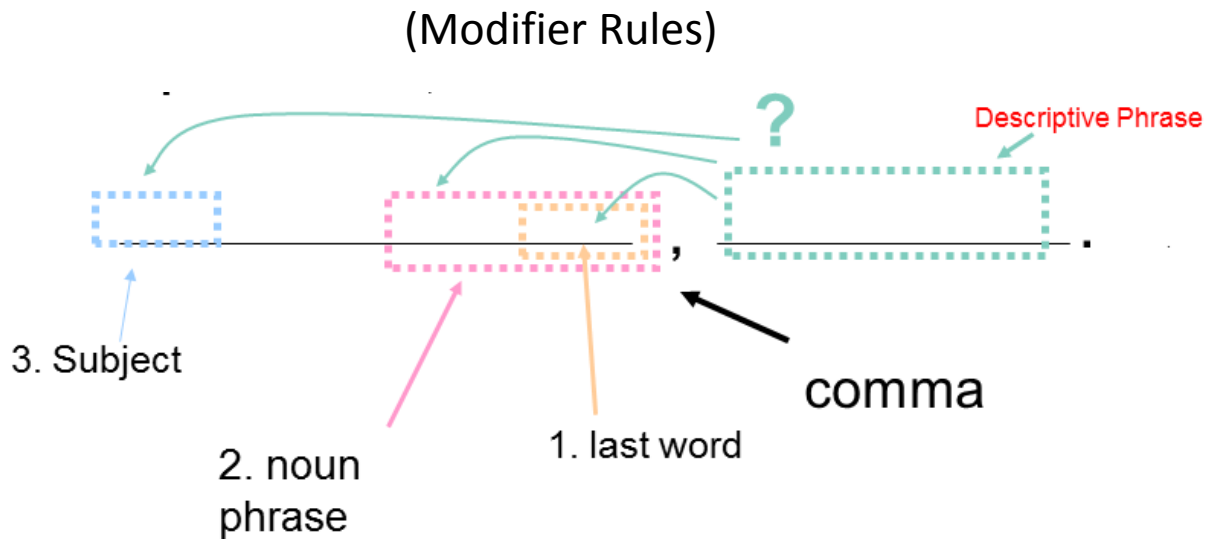
Using **STRUCTURE & MEANING**

to decipher modifiers



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Framework #3: Descriptive Phrase, Main Sentence



How do we know which of the 3 is the one it describes?

The antique dealer displayed the cabinet in his window, beautifully restored...

Example Sentence:

“The antique dealer displayed the cabinet in his window, beautifully restored...”

Q: Does the descriptive phrase “beautifully restored” describe (color coded with diagram above):

- 1) The word closest to the comma (last word) = “window”
- 2) The entire noun phrase (“far away noun”) = “cabinet in his window”
- 3) The subject = “antique dealer”

How do we know which one?

Example Sentence #1 (GMAT Pill):

“The antique dealer displayed the cabinet in his window, beautifully restored...”

Q: Does the descriptive phrase “beautifully restored” describe (color coded with diagram above):

- 1) The word closest to the comma (last word) = “window”
- 2) The entire noun phrase (“far away noun”) = “cabinet in his window”
- 3) The subject = “antique dealer”

Yes, it is usually the case that the modifier (descriptive phrase) modifies the word immediately next to the comma. (option #1 above)

Usually....

But there are also SITUATIONS in which they do NOT modify the word next to the comma.

Instead...

they can and sometimes do modify a “far away” noun further to the left of the comma—when that “far away” noun is part of an entire noun entity phrase.

GMAT folks know that a lot of test takers assume that these “descriptive phrases” ALWAYS modify the word immediately next to the comma. They know a lot of test takers automatically eliminate answer choices that don’t follow this supposed “rule” so they try to trap you either by tempting you to eliminate the correct answer or by presenting answer choices that seemingly “fit” the common rule – but are actually wrong.

How do we know when this is the case?

- 1) How do we know when the descriptive phrase modifies the word immediately next to the comma? (option #1)
- 2) How do we know when the descriptive phrase modifies the “farther away” word further to the left? (option #2)

Well, in order to know which option, we need to understand the MEANING of the left side.

The Role of STRUCTURE & MEANING in determining whether we are modifying “window” or “cabinet in his window”

Example Sentence #1 (GMAT Pill) Repeated:

“The antique dealer displayed the cabinet in his window, beautifully restored...”

Ask yourself: Is the “cabinet” DEFINED as “cabinet in his window” ?

Can you replace “cabinet in his window” with “x” and read the sentence as:

“The antique dealer displayed [X], beautifully restored” ?

If so, then the “beautifully restored” would modify the entire phrase “cabinet in his window” with an emphasis on the word “cabinet.”

If not, then the “beautifully restored” would modify only the last word “window.”

But does this still make sense if you replaced “cabinet in his window” with “X” as in:

“The antique dealer displayed [X], beautifully restored...”

Answer: NO!

Why?

Because “cabinet” is NOT defined as “cabinet in his window”

Instead, the preposition “in his window” is part of the larger sentence:

“The antique dealer displayed [the cabinet] in his window, beautifully restored...”

“The antique dealer displayed [X] in his window, beautifully restored...”

Yes, this makes more sense.

So based on the MEANING of the left side of the sentence, we should expect what follows after the comma to STRUCTURALLY describe “window” – the word closest to the comma (option #1).

Revisiting:

*“The antique dealer displayed [the cabinet] in his **window**, beautifully restored...”*

So **STRUCTURALLY**, the descriptive phrase needs to describe “window.”

MEANING-WISE we need to make sure that it makes sense for a “window” to be “beautifully restored” and that it is the intended meaning of the sentence.

We can't really know for sure since the sentence is not complete.

But if we completed the sentence as such:

“The antique dealer displayed the cabinet in his window, beautifully restored to its original wooden condition.”

--then we know we have a problem with the **MEANING** because it does not make sense for a “window” to be “beautifully restored to its original wooden condition” – since windows are not made of wood!

Thus, we have the **STRUCTURE** saying one thing but the **MEANING** of the right side of the sentence saying another.

Whenever we have this discrepancy between STRUCTURE and MEANING – then we know something is wrong.

In order to correct this sentence, we would have to either:

- 1) Change the meaning of the descriptive phrase such that it makes sense modifying “window”
- 2) Change the structure of the left side such that there is no preposition.

Potential solutions to the above two options might be:

- 1) “The antique dealer displayed the cabinet in his window, which was made of high quality glass.”
– **that's OK. Notice we changed the meaning.**
- 2) “The antique dealer cherished his cabinet, beautifully restored to its original wooden condition.”
– **that's OK. Notice we changed the structure on the left side by removing the preposition.**

So back to our original dilemma:

“The antique dealer displayed the cabinet in his window, beautifully restored...”

Q: Does the descriptive phrase “beautifully restored” describe (color coded with diagram above):

- 1) **The word closest to the comma (last word) = “window”**
- 2) **The entire noun phrase (“far away noun”) = “cabinet in his window”**
- 3) **The subject = “antique dealer”**

What's the answer?

Option #1

Based on the STRUCTURE of the sentence to the left of the COMMA, it would be option #1 (“window”). Note that the MEANING of what follows must be consistent and make sense!

But note it COULD also be option #2 – we would need to remove the preposition “in his window” and thereby modify the STRUCTURE of the sentence in order to make this work.

What about Official Guide (OG) Examples?

Let’s look at some OG examples that test this concept.

Example Sentence #2: OG13 #35, pg 40 Modifier Exercise

Unlike the buildings in Mesopotamian cities, which were arranged haphazardly, the same basic plan was followed for all cities of the Indus Valley: with houses laid out on a north-south, east-west grid, and houses and walls were built of standard-size bricks.

(A) the buildings in Mesopotamian cities, which were arranged haphazardly, the same basic plan was followed for all cities of the Indus Valley: with houses

OG13 #35, pg 40 Exercise

“Unlike the buildings in Mesopotamian cities, which were arranged haphazardly, the same ...”



Q: What exactly “were arranged haphazardly”?

Is it the **cities** that were arranged haphazardly?

Or is it the **buildings** that were arranged haphazardly?

Answer: It’s the **BUILDINGS** that were arranged haphazardly.

So the sentence structure is:

✓ “Unlike [X], which were arranged haphazardly...”

Note: This is different from “**displaying** [x] in a window” or “**putting** [x] on the table” because the word “**unlike**” is different from “**display**” or “**put**”

Notice here that we are treating “buildings in Mesopotamian cities” as an entire noun entity. The buildings are effectively defined (in this context) as “buildings in Mesopotamian cities.” We are not

talking about “buildings” in general. Instead, we are talking specifically about “buildings in Mesopotamian cities.”

Note how this contrasts with the earlier example.

Earlier we were talking about the “cabinet” that happened to be “by the window” - and that someone PUT the cabinet by the window. We were NOT referencing the “cabinet by the window” in the way we are now referencing “buildings in Mesopotamian cities.”

See the difference?

So back to our example OG13 SC Diagnostic #35:

“Unlike the buildings in Mesopotamian cities, which were arranged haphazardly, the same basic plan was followed for all cities of the Indus Valley: with houses laid out on a north-south, east-west grid, and houses and walls were built of standard-size bricks.”

Now that we know the phrase “which were arranged haphazardly” modifies the head of the entire noun phrase “buildings in Mesopotamian cities” – which is “buildings” – then we know it is the BUILDINGS which were arranged haphazardly.

So we know the intended meaning of the sentence is to mention that the buildings were arranged haphazardly.

Note that it is technically possible to still have the descriptive phrase structurally modify “cities” – please see example #4 below.

Now, even though we figured out that the descriptive phrase is modifying BUILDING instead of CITIES – that’s still not enough to find the answer.

We need to focus on STRUCTURE.

Recall the structure of the sentence is:

Unlike [X], [Y] blah blah blah...

So this brings in some elements of Framework #2 (Apples & Oranges) as well as #6 (X & Y Consistency; Parallelism).

If [X] = “buildings (in Mesopotamian cities)...”

Can [Y] = “the same basic plan” ?

Structurally that must be true. But we know from a MEANING perspective, it does NOT make sense.

It does not make sense to compare “buildings” with “the same basic plan”

When STRUCTURE and MEANING do not match, we know we must change something – rearrange the structure of the sentence perhaps.

After reviewing the other answer choices for alternative sentence structures, you will notice that (C) offers a different structure and (D)/(E) offer another different structure.

The problem with (C) is that they compare “arrangement” with “cities” – which does not make sense. So (C) cannot be correct.

(D) reads as:

“Unlike Mesopotamian cities, in which buildings were arranged haphazardly, the cities of the Indus Valley all followed the same basic plan...”

So here we still have the descriptive phrase “in which buildings were arranged haphazardly” describing “Mesopotamian cities.” Noticed we moved the word “building” from the front of the sentence to inside the descriptive phrase. This allows us to position “Mesopotamian cities” as the [X] phrase in order to compare it directly with the [Y] as in:

Unlike [X], [Y]...

(D): Unlike [Mesopotamian cities], in which buildings were arranged haphazardly, [the cities of the Indus valley] all followed the same basic plan...

So the descriptive phrase “in which buildings were arranged haphazardly” maintains the intended meaning of the original sentence while repositioning the structure of the sentence such that a parallel comparison between cities in one place is made with cities in another place.

Example Sentence #3: GMAT Prep

So we’ve provided a GMAT Pill example and an OG example.

Here’s a GMATPrep example:

3. “The electronics company has unveiled what it claims to be the world’s smallest network digital camcorder, the length of which is that of a handheld computer, and it weighs less than 11 ounces.

- A. to be the world’s smallest network digital camcorder, the length of which is that of a handheld computer, and it weighs
- B. to be the smallest network digital camcorder in the world, which is as long as a handheld computer, weighing
- C. is the smallest network digital camcorder in the world, which is as long as a handheld computer, and it weighs
- D. is the world’s smallest network digital camcorder, which is as long as a handheld

computer and weighs

- E. is the world's smallest network digital camcorder, the length of which is that of a handheld computer, weighing

Here the answer is D. But take a look at answer choice (C).

What is the descriptive phrase “which is as long as a handheld computer” modifying?

- 1) Is it modifying the word closest to the comma “world” ?
- 2) Or is it modifying the entire noun phrase “smallest network digital camcorder in the world” with an emphasis on the head of that noun phrase “smallest camcorder” ?

Remember, figure out the STRUCTURE of the sentence as we did with prior examples above:

“The electronics company has unveiled what it claims to be [X], which is as long as a handheld computer...”

Based on the meaning of the left side of the sentence, we know that the entire phrase is treated as a single entity.

Here, X = “smallest network digital camcorder in the world”

So now that we have this structure, we know that the descriptive phrase could structurally describe the head of that noun phrase: “smallest camcorder” --- OR it could structurally describe “world.”

That's what it dictates in terms of structure.

What about meaning?

Does it make sense that the “smallest camcorder” is “as long as a handheld computer”?

Yes!

So actually (C) is OK in terms of modifiers and balancing STRUCTURE and MEANING.

It turns out (C) is ultimately wrong for a different reason – towards the end of the sentence.

The phrase “..., and it weighs” is awkwardly positioned. The word “it” is not necessary there.

So even though (C) is the wrong answer – it provides an interesting analysis of structure and meaning.

Ultimately, (D) is the correct answer. You should see that in (D) the descriptive phrase clearly modifies “world's smallest camcorder” – largely because there are no prepositions to complicate things.

Example #4: GMATPrep

The **survival of coral colonies**, **which are composed of innumerable tiny polyps** living in a symbiotic relationship with brilliantly colored algae, are being threatened, experts say, not only by pollutants like agricultural runoff, oil sticks, and trash, but also by dropped anchors, probing drivers, and global warming.

- A. are being threatened, experts say, not only by pollutants like
- B. are being threatened, experts say, by not only pollutants such as
- C. is not only being threatened, experts say, by pollutants such as
- D. is not only being threatened, experts say, by pollutants like
- E. is being threatened, experts say, not only by pollutants such as

Descriptive phrase = “which are composed of innumerable tiny polyps...”

Is it modifying “**coral colonies**”?

Or is it modifying “survival of coral colonies” – with an emphasis on survival?

From a meaning perspective, it does not make sense for “survival” to be “composed of tiny polyps.” It only makes sense for “coral colonies” to be composed of “tiny polyps.”

So it must be that the descriptive phrase modifies “**coral colonies**” instead of “survival.”

It is the “coral colonies...which are composed of innumerable tiny polyps...”

So note that whenever you have an entire entity noun phrase such as “survival of coral colonies” – it can go either way.

We can either modify the head of that noun phrase “survival”...

OR

We can modify the word closest to the comma “colonies.”

How do we know which one? It depends on the MEANING.

So structurally it can go either way. But it shte meaning that ultimately decides which word is being modified.

So there you have – 4 examples – one from GMAT Pill, one from OG, and two from GMATPrep – each of which provide insight into the balancing of **STRUCTURE** and **MEANING** in the context of modifiers and sentences that follow this sentence structure:

“**[Main sentence], [descriptive phrase]**”

So whenever you spot this setup on the GMAT, you should apply Framework #3 to help you quickly resolve grammar issues and eliminate answer choices.

Last Exercise – Revisiting the Antique Dealer

As a last exercise, let’s revisit the example provided in the beginning:

Consider two sentences with the exact same structure:

- 1) “The antique dealer displayed the cabinet in his window, which was made of glass.”
- 2) “The antique dealer displayed the cabinet from Greece, which was made of wood.”

Notice the **STRUCTURE** is exactly the same in both examples.

The difference is in the usage.

It is clear that in #1, you are displaying something **IN** a certain location.

Whereas in #2, you are displaying a particular item (which happens to be from Greece) – but you are not displaying that particular item **FROM** Greece (assuming that is not the intended meaning, though possible given enough context). We assume you are not physically standing in Greece displaying the cabinet. Rather, you are displaying a cabinet – and that cabinet happens to be from Greece.

In other words, the phrase “from Greece” is not part of the overall sentence. Instead, it is just **FLUFF** that is further describing the “cabinet” that we are talking about.

So in the case of #2, the descriptive phrase structurally modifies **CABINET**.

And in the case of #1, the descriptive phrase structurally modifies **WINDOW**.

From there, it’s up to you to make sure that the meaning of what follows actually makes sense for each case-- “which was made of glass” matches with “window” etc..

Conclusion

If you are dealing with noun phrases such as “cabinet in the windows” or “lock on the door” or “survival of coral colonies,” then you can modify EITHER one – it depends on meaning.

If you are NOT dealing with the noun phrases, then you can safely say you are modifying the word closest to the comma (most common).

- 1) **Certain words (such as “display” or “put”) only allow for the possibility that the descriptive phrase modifies the word closest to the comma (most common).**

Example: “He **put** the lock on the **door**, which was made of wood.” (modifying **door**)

- 2) **Other words create a situation in which the descriptive phrase can modify either the head of the entire entity noun phrase OR just the last word closest to the comma. It depends on MEANING of what follows in the descriptive phrase.**

Example 1A: “He **hated** the lock on the door, which required a combination in order to unlock.” (modifying **lock**)

Example 1B: “He hated the lock on the door, which was made of wood.” (modifying **door**)

Example 2A (GMATPrep): “The survival of coral colonies, which are composed of innumerable tiny polyps...” (modifying **colonies**, NOT survival)

Example 2B: “The survival of coral colonies, which is unheralded in this part of the world...” (modifying **survival**, NOT colonies)

Recall that we presented 3 Options above.

We discussed in detail options #1 and #2.

What about #3? How do we modify the structure of the sentence in a way that makes the descriptive phrase modify the SUBJECT “antique dealer” ?