Grammar Girl here.

Today guest-writer Bonnie Trenga is going to help us take a break from serious grammar and instead delve into the world of comedy—some intentional, some not. Groucho Marx said it best: “One morning I shot an elephant in my pajamas. How he got into my pajamas I’ll never know” (1). I’m sure you thought that was funny, but did you ever consider why it’s hilarious?

**Prepositional Phrases and Misplaced Modifiers**

You’ve probably heard the term “misplaced modifier” before. It refers to a phrase or clause that “acts on something other than what the writer intended … The modifier is in the wrong position relative to what it should be affecting” (2). In this show, we’ll explore the world of misplaced prepositional phrases, a kind of misplaced modifier. A modifier is a phrase or clause that describes something. A prepositional phrase is a short phrase that begins with a preposition. Prepositions include “in,” “at,” and “through.” A prepositional phrase gets misplaced when the writer puts it next to the wrong word.

Groucho’s joke is funny for the same reason that this real classified ad, laughed at in the book *Sin and Syntax*, is: “FOR SALE: Mahogany table by a lady with Chippendale legs” (3). Both sentences contain a misplaced prepositional phrase. Groucho intentionally put the phrase “in my pajamas” next to the word “elephant” to create the funny image of an elephant wearing PJs. Of course, the man, not the pachyderm, was wearing PJs. In the classified ad, the table, not the lady, has Chippendale legs. The writer carelessly put the prepositional phrase “with Chippendale legs” in the wrong place. Oops!

**Some More Laughs**

If only all writers could be as careful with their prepositional phrases as Groucho was. He put his in the wrong place on purpose to make us laugh. Many writers, though, unintentionally become comedians when they put their phrases in the wrong spot. A quick look at some grammar resources reveals that students, newspapers, and books are not taking as much care with prepositional phrases as they should. Here are three examples of what you should not write. *Sin and Syntax*, which gave us the Chippendale legs mishap earlier, also quotes a student who once wrote this: “Abraham
Lincoln wrote the Gettysburg address while traveling from Washington to Gettysburg on the back of an envelope” (4). This amusing sentence suggests that Lincoln traveled on the back of an envelope instead of wrote on the back of an envelope.

Also worth a few chuckles is this headline, quoted in Barbara Walraff’s book *Word Court*: “Two Sisters Reunited After 18 Years in Checkout Counter” (5). So these ladies spent 18 years at checkout? Hmm.

Lastly, we have this incorrect sentence, found in the latest novel by a *New York Times* best-selling author: “We found the address he gave me without difficulty” (6). I’m glad it wasn’t difficult to give out the address. Here, the prepositional phrase “without difficulty” has been misplaced. It’s next to “gave me” instead of “found.”

**Why We Make This Mistake**

As you can see, even the best of us misplace our prepositional phrases. When we’re writing complex sentences, it’s easy to inadvertently put our phrases next to the wrong word. We sometimes make errors with our prepositional phrases because we are trying to join up too many ideas at once.

The Gettysburg sentence was caused by overcramming. It would be better to make the “Lincoln” sentence two sentences: “Abraham Lincoln wrote the Gettysburg address while traveling from Washington to Gettysburg. He didn’t have any paper on hand, so he wrote the speech on the back of an envelope.” That sounds much better.

Most of the time, though, misplaced prepositional phrases happen simply because writers are careless. That seems to be the case with the sentence about the street address. The writer just wasn’t paying attention to the sentence structure.

**Solution to the Problem**

It’s easy to fix overly long sentences: just make them shorter! In all seriousness, though, if you are writing a sentence and are having trouble fitting together all the components, consider making your enormous sentence two more manageable sentences. Check out Chapter 6 of Bonnie's book *The Curious Case of the Misplaced Modifier* for some suggestions on how to tame overly long sentences.

As for dealing with carelessness, we’re all careless at times, so just remember to proofread yourself or have a friend or co-worker watch your back. Most important, though, when you see a prepositional phrase, make sure it is right next to what it modifies. You don’t want to inadvertently put
an elephant into anyone’s pajamas. Thanks, Groucho, for the grammar lesson!

**The Curious Case of the Misplaced Modifier**

This podcast was written by Bonnie Trenga, author of *The Curious Case of the Misplaced Modifier*, who blogs at sentencesleuth.blogspot.com, and I’m Mignon Fogarty, the author of the paperback book *Grammar Girl’s Quick and Dirty Tips for Better Writing*. 