Word Order and Position of Modifiers

The position of a word or a group of words in a sentence may make a difference in meaning, clarity, or style. One principle to remember: the normal word order is subject-verb-complement/object. Another: the modifier usually appears as close as possible to the word modified. Adjectives don’t move around much: they appear close to the noun or pronoun they modify. Adverbs/Adverbial phrases are more movable and may cause trouble, especially when there are a number of modifiers in the sentence.

A. Make sure of the placement of **only, not, even, hardly, again, and ever**, for the sake of clarity and smoothness.

**Imprecise**
She only married him because he was prosperous.

(In conversational English, this is acceptable. Voice inflection makes the meaning clear. But there is a possible ambiguity.)

**Revised**
She married him **only** because he was prosperous.

B. Correlative conjunctions also are tricky, because they introduce parallel units.

**Awkward**
Merrill is **not only** exhausted, **but** he is **also** bewildered and lost.

**Revised**
Merrill is **not only** exhausted, **but also** bewildered and lost.
Merrill **not only** is exhausted **but also** bewildered and lost.

**Awkward**
He **either** wants a Zenith **or** a Sony.

**Revised**
He wants **either** a Zenith **or** a Sony.
Awkward
I would like to live in a house both with a fenced yard and a screened porch.

Revised
I would like to live in a house with both a fenced yard and a screened porch.

C. If a phrase is misplaced in a sentence, awkwardness or unintended meaning can result:

Faulty
I will try to show why I hold this belief in this theme.

Revised
I will try to show in this theme why I hold this belief.

Faulty
Another aspect I find interesting of science fiction is that its scientific vision may be prophet of the future.

Revised
Another aspect of science fiction that I find interesting is that its scientific vision.

D. Modifiers inserted into a verb group are sometimes awkward, but particularly when they are lengthy:

Awkward
Big colleges can, by virtue of their size, field a good football team.

(Start the sentence with By virtue of their size. Doing so not only will unite the verb, but will also provide a varied sentence beginning.)

Modifiers may appear awkwardly between subject and verb:

Faulty
I, like most people, have received a religious training.

(The writer of this sentence had a compulsion to begin every sentence with the subject regardless of any other consideration. He
E. It is sometimes awkward to break up prepositional phrases by inserting modifiers.

   Faulty
   His sister was almost like, he thought, a mother.

   Revised
   ... like a mother, he thought.

F. The tendency to split an infinitive by inserting an adverbial is widespread and is regarded by students of the language to be natural. Sometimes there is no other acceptable way to write the sentence. However, the doctrine that splitting the infinitive is wrong has been taught in schools for so long that many careful writers avoid this practice. We may say here that some splittings are clearly awkward and easily avoidable:

   Awkward
   The problem then is to not only improve educational standards, but to also regain the good reputation of our educational system.

   Revised
   The problem is not only to improve educational standards but also to regain...