



Ms. Particular Presents: Only

Celia M. Elliott
Department of Physics
University of Illinois



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**“Only” is the most commonly
misplaced modifier in English**

**“Only” immediately preceding a verb is usually
in the wrong place**

Here’s a simple declarative sentence:

“He said that he loved me.”

We can all agree on what the sentence means.

**Now look what happens when we randomly
perturb the sentence with “only”...**

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“He said that he loved me.”

Only he said that he loved me.

Nobody else said it.

He **only** said that he loved me.

He didn't really mean it; he only said it.

He said **only** that he loved me.

He didn't say a word about marriage.

He said that **only** he loved me.

He doesn't know about Serge.

He said that he **only** loved me.

He doesn't respect me.

He said that he loved **only** me.

He thinks I don't know about Clarice.

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Here's a science example:

“A transition only occurred at 130 K in underdoped samples.”

Did the transition only *occur* (it didn't persist)?

Or did it occur only at 130 K?

Or only in underdoped samples?

Only the author knows...

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“Only” immediately preceding a verb is probably in the wrong place

- ☹️ “Thus a single phase slip center *only* occurs at $I = I_c$, and its dissipative size is $\lambda_Q \geq L$.”
- ☹️ “The occupied electronic states *only* show features associated with the carbon lattice of the SWNT cage.”
- 😊 “At last, we will be able to directly probe the TeV energy scale, where it is believed that some new physics should be lurking, although we can *only* speculate about what form it will take.”

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But it’s not only verbs you have to watch out for

- ☹️ “Extensive shielding ensured that *only* scattering from the marked regions was detected.”
- ☹️ “Usually, the analytical evaluation of $J(X_p, t; X_p, 0)$, even for time-independent systems, is *only* possible in very few cases.”

**Be careful of your “only”s—
they can get you into a lot of trouble!**

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