

How to Use the Word Only Correctly

The word "only" is used everywhere, but usually incorrectly. When it's used incorrectly, the listener (or reader) has to figure out what you really meant to say. Once you know the reason behind the rule, you can speak and write more accurately and less ambiguously.

It's important to understand that the word "only" describes, or modifies, the word or clause right after it

For example, "the only cookie", or "I only looked at him." In these two examples, it's clear what "only" modifies. In the first example, it's the word "cookie". "Only" emphasizes that there is only one cookie. (If there were only more of them...) In the second example, "only" modifies the verb "looked", emphasizing that the only action that took place was "looking", not "hitting" or any other action.

Learn by example

Here's a sentence in which "only" can be used in several places, and every place means something different!

- "She kissed him on the lips."
 - If you write "Only she kissed him on the lips.", that means that she, and no one else kissed him.
 - If you write "She only kissed him on the lips.", "kissing" was the action, and no other, such as touching.
 - If you write "She kissed only him on the lips.", you know that he was special to her as she kissed him and no one else.
 - If you write "She kissed him only on the lips.", then she has good aim. Her kiss didn't land under, over, or to the sides.
 - If you write "She kissed him on the lips only.", then this is the same as the preceding example.

Now that you're an expert, you're doomed to listening and reading everyone else misuse "only"

You'll understand what they really said/wrote, and try to figure out what they really meant!

Tips

- If you correct someone, say it with the tone of "I understand that you meant is that right?", rather than being officious or obnoxious.
- When you read to your child, read the sentences with "only" correctly, the way it should have been written, rather than perpetuating the misuse of the word.

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