

Only

The Craft of Writing · By Simon Townsend · 1 min read

You have put the word only in the wrong place. Be careful with the word only. Top flight journalists frequently use it sloppily. While the reader will usually understand what you mean, it makes you look careless. For instance, if you write "She was only having two drinks", readers understand only applies to the number of drinks rather than the number of activities she was performing with them. (Apart from "having" two drinks she might have been making, mixing or playing with two drinks, etc.) It is not precise writing if you put only in the wrong place.

The general rule is: put only as close as possible to the word it modifies (applies to).

1. Only I knew the correct answer.
2. Means I was the one person who knew the correct answer.
3. I only knew the correct answer.
4. Means all I did was know it. I didn't feel it, or eat it, I only knew it.
5. I knew only the correct answer.
6. Means all I knew was the correct answer. I didn't know any of the incorrect answers.
7. I knew the only correct answer.
8. Means I knew the one answer which was correct (all other answers were wrong).
9. I knew the correct answer only.
10. Means the same as 3.

Now I've told you this, you will start to notice how the word only is mis-used by professionals who should know better. Advertisements, journalism, novels, encyclopedias, manuals and so on, constantly mis-use the word only. Don't you.

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