On-line Grammar Workshop
for Peer Writing Tutors & Middlebury College Students

Topic: Dangling Participles

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Why care about grammar rules?

Grammar rules were not designed to make your life miserable or to inhibit your creativity or freedom.

Instead, grammar rules help you better communicate exactly what YOU want to say. One error that particularly confuses and perplexes your readers is the problem of dangling or misplaced modifiers.
So--what is a participle?
Like a mermaid, it has two identities.

A participle is a **verb** form that acts like an **adjective**. Present participles end in **ing** *(dancing)*. Past participle usually end in **ed** *(danced)*.

Here are examples of participles *(dancing & sunken)* acting like **adjectives** by describing nouns *(girl & ship)*:
The **dancing** girl twirled around the room.
The **sunken** ship held many treasures.
Not a problem--right?

But what happens if we move our participles *dancing* and *sunken* away from the nouns (girl and ship) that we want them to describe?

The *girl* twirled around the *dancing* room.

The *ship* held many *sunken* treasures.

Because we have moved our participles, we have changed the meaning of the sentences, and the problem intensifies when our participles expand into phrases.
When participles expand into phrases, they become harder to handle, easier to *misplace*, more likely to *dangle*.

Let’s look as some participial phrases:

– Dancing around the room . . .
– Running down the alley . . .
– Having studied for the exam . . .
Now let’s try one out in a sentence.

Dancing around the room, it became dizzier and dizzier.

What does the participial phrase, “Dancing around the room,” describe?

- it?
- room?

Neither.

There is NOTHING for our participial phrase to describe--so we say it DANGLES.

Correct the sentence this way:

Dancing around the room, the girl became dizzier and dizzier.
So--to correct a dangling participle, add the word you want your participle to describe.

**Dancing around the room, the girl** became dizzier and dizzier.
Misplaced Participles

Let’s try another participial phrase in a sentence: **Running down the alley**

Running down the alley, the garbage can tripped the boy.

Now--what does our participial phrase, “Running down the alley,” describe? garbage can? boy?

Of course, the answer should be boy, but our sentence is confusing because our participle is not next to boy.

Our participle is **misplaced**.
Correcting Misplaced Modifiers

So--to correct a misplaced participle, place the word you want your participle to describe close to your participle.

Correct the sentence this way:

**Running down the alley**, the **boy** tripped over the garbage can.
Why use participles?

Participles can enhance your writing, but only if they convey your intended meaning. They will describe whatever is closest to them. It is up to you as writer to make participles describe exactly what YOU want them to describe.

Let’s see what we can do with our last participial phrase:

**Having studied for the exam . . .**
Using Participles Correctly

Having studied for the exam, I felt confident about taking it.

What does our participle “Having studied for the exam” describe?

It describes I, and we have used our participle correctly.
Remember that participles MUST be **right next to** what they describe: if they do not, they are **MISPLACED**.

Remember that participles MUST have **SOMETHING** to describe, if they do not, they **DANGLE**.

Purdue’s OWL site has a great discussion of participles.
Come see us in CTLR for one-on-one instruction.

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