



In the Service of *Good Writing*

It's particularly important for editors to be conversant with the rules of Standard English syntax. This knowledge will enable you to decide what editorial changes are truly necessary and to explain the need for those changes to your authors. In the Service of Good Writing is a Journal series designed to show writers and editors how to use the mechanics of Standard English to improve clarity and style.

Dangling Participles

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Bad writers usually have no idea how bad their writing is. Thus, they are usually truly shocked at how heavily I have to edit their work to make it suitable for publication. They complain that I am arbitrary, heavy-handed, and mean. But then, something magical sometimes happens. I have the bad writer review the parts of speech and learn how to diagram a sentence. I teach him or her a few simple rules of syntax. Then, suddenly, the bad writer is transformed into a competent writer. I have seen this change occur within a matter of days. From that point onward, that person's manuscripts would pass through my department virtually unscathed.

In the September issue, I wrote about one of the syntactical errors that are common in bad writing: the misplaced prepositional phrase.¹ In this issue, I'll talk about another serious problem: dangling participles.

What is a dangling participle?

A modifier is a word or phrase that changes the meaning of some other element in the sentence. A modifier is said to "dangle" if whatever it is supposed to modify is missing from the sentence. Participial phrases are the most common form of dangling modifier. Consider the following classic example.

Walking to school today, my book fell in the mud.

Obviously, the book was not walking. The participial phrase *walking to school today* does not modify any noun

or pronoun that's in the sentence. Thus, it is said to be dangling. To solve the grammatical problem, you can add the participle's true subject, plus the appropriate auxiliary verb and a subordinating conjunction, to the introductory phrase.

While I was walking to school today, my book fell in the mud.

The sentence is now correct syntactically, but it doesn't really tell the whole story. Here's a solution that is more satisfying. Not only does it connect the participle to the correct noun, it explains why the book fell into the mud, and who was responsible.

While walking to school today, I accidentally dropped my book in the mud.

Of course, if you were editing this sentence, you would most likely need to query the author to find out how and why the book fell in the mud.

Dangling or simply misplaced?

If you start a sentence with a participial phrase, the phrase will sound as if it is modifying the subject, whether you want it to or not. Here is an example from an old edition of the *American Medical Association Manual of Style*.

Organized into 13 chapters, the reader of this book will benefit from an extensive appendix.

In this case, the modifier is not dangling but merely misplaced. AMA's original solution was to make it clear that the book, rather than the reader, is organized into chapters; but why mention the reader at all? Here's a better solution:

The book is organized into 13 chapters and has an extensive appendix.

Is the phrase dangling or absolute?

Many people have trouble telling a dangling or misplaced phrase from an absolute phrase. An absolute phrase doesn't modify something within the sentence, or even something that's missing from the sentence. It modifies **the sentence as a whole**, or perhaps an entire independent clause.

An absolute phrase normally contains a noun or pronoun but no true verb. It may contain adjectives, prepositional phrases, adverbs, and participles. Here's a sentence that begins with an absolute phrase.

His face white with rage, he looked at all of the changes the arbitrary, mean-spirited editor made in his flawless manuscript.

In contrast, here's a sentence that begins with a participial phrase. Notice that it modifies the subject.

Blushing in embarrassment, he realized that the manuscript he submitted was riddled with errors in syntax.

In the following example, from the current edition of the *AMA Manual of Style*, the introductory phrase is a participial phrase and therefore won't work as an absolute phrase.

Based on my experience, English majors make excellent copyeditors.

Based on my experience doesn't qualify as an absolute phrase because it doesn't contain a noun or pronoun, or even imply one. Thus, the phrase will sound as if it is modifying the subject; but it doesn't make sense to say that English majors are "based on my experience." If you want to modify the entire sentence, use a prepositional phrase, such as in the following example.

In my opinion, English majors make excellent copyeditors.

You could also make *I* the subject of the sentence.

I have found that English majors make excellent copyeditors.

Of course, the statement that English majors make excellent copyeditors is clearly an opinion. Why is it so important to emphasize whose opinion it is? How does that sentence fit in with the general flow of the argument?

Improving your skills

In my experience, English majors make excellent copyeditors only if they learned about grammar and syntax in school. Sadly, the teaching of those rules seems to have gone out of fashion.

I've asked many people why students are no longer taught how to diagram sentences. The explanations are idiotic. One is that you can make a good diagram even for some meaningless sentences, such as *Colorless green ideas sleep furiously*. Yet even though that sentence is nonsensical, it obeys the rules of syntax. In comparison, look at this example from Gertrude Stein: *The change the dirt, not to change dirt means that there is no beefsteak and not to have that is no obstruction, it is so easy to exchange meaning, it is so easy to see the difference* (*Tender Buttons*, as found on www.bartleby.com/140/2.html). The sentence is not only meaningless, it's a syntactical nightmare. Stein wrote that

way on purpose, to play with people's heads. Unfortunately, many of our authors write like that accidentally.

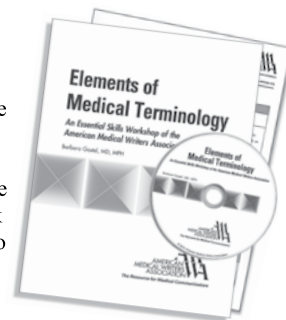
If you want to avoid writing like that accidentally, review the basic rules of English syntax. When I was training copyeditors and proofreaders, I would have them review Capital Community College's Guide to Grammar and Writing (<http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/index.htm>), including the presentation on how to diagram a sentence. Then I'd ask them to take all the quizzes. There are many other useful resources for learning grammar and syntax. You can use whatever you like, but I strongly recommend using something that includes quizzes.

References

1. Thomas L. In the service of good writing. *AMWA J.* 2010;25(3):122-123.

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