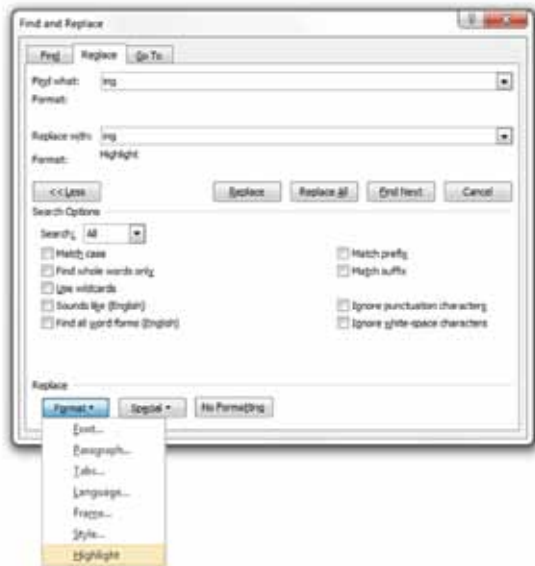


Watch Out for *-ing!*

By Laurie Endicott Thomas, MA, ELS

To ensure that all of my present participles are being used correctly, I use my word processor's Find-and-Replace feature to highlight every instance of the character string *ing*. It highlights the *ing* that appears at the end of every English present participle. (Of course, it will also highlight the *ing* in words like *string* and *stringent*). Then I look at each highlighted word and remove the highlighting from the words that are being used correctly.



A participle is a word that has been formed from a verb and that can be used as part of a compound verb or as an adjective or noun. In English, there are 2 types of participle: present and past. In this article, I will limit the discussion to present participles, the ones that end in *-ing*.

An English present participle is always formed by adding *ing* to the end of the stem of the verb. Sometimes, you have to make minor adjustments to the spelling of the stem, such as dropping the silent *e* at the end of some words (write, writing) or adding an additional consonant after a short vowel but not after a long vowel (strip, stripping but stripe, striping).

Verb, Adjective, or Noun?

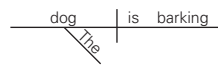
When you see an English present participle, you need to think

about whether it is being used as part of a verb, as an adjective, or as a noun. In English, a present participle is used along with one or more auxiliary verbs (*is, are, was, were, had been, have been, will have been*) to express the progressive aspect (ongoing action) of a verb:

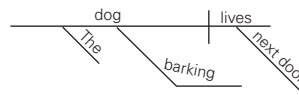
- ☺ She is eating. (Present progressive tense)
- ☺ They were laughing. (Past progressive tense)
- ☺ By that time, he will have been waiting for an hour. (Future perfect progressive tense)

The following examples show how a present participle (*barking*) can be part of a verb or serve as a verbal adjective or a verbal noun. Notice how the Reed-Kellogg diagrams of these sentences make the syntactical relationships clear:

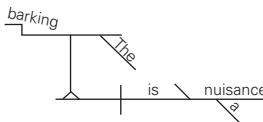
- ☺ The dog is barking. (*Barking* is part of the verb phrase *is barking*)



- ☺ The barking dog lives next door. (*Barking* is being used as an adjective.)



- ☺ The barking is a nuisance. (A present participle that is being used as a noun is called a gerund.)



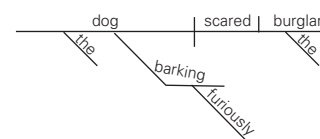
Verb Phrases and Participial Phrases

A present or past participle can be part of a phrase. A phrase is a string of words that can act as a single part of speech. The head of the phrase is the word that determines what kind of phrase it is (eg, a verb phrase or a noun phrase). The rest of the phrase is called the complement of the phrase. Note that the head of the phrase is not always the first word in the phrase.

The sentence *The dog is barking* consists of 2 phrases: the noun phrase *The dog* and the verb phrase *is barking*. The noun *dog* is the head of the noun phrase and the auxiliary verb—*is*—is the head of the verb phrase. In that sentence, the word *barking* is the complement of the verb phrase.

A present participle can serve as the head of a participial phrase:

- ☺ Barking furiously, the dog scared the burglar.



In that example, *furiously* is an adverb modifying the participle *barking*, which in turn is an adjective modifying *dog*. Note

that you could also incorporate that adjective and adverb into the noun phrase:

- ☺ The furiously barking dog scared the burglar.

Because participial phrases are derived from verb phrases, the other words that appear in the complement of a verb phrase can appear in a participial phrase. For example, if the participle is from a transitive verb, the participial phrase will include the direct object of the verb.

- ☺ Hurling insults (participle and direct object of a transitive verb)

If, on the other hand, the verb is a linking verb, then the predicate complement (the noun or adjective that the linking verb links to its subject) will show up in the participial phrase.

- ☺ Feeling strong (participle and adjective complement of a linking verb).

If the present participle is from a transitive verb, its complement would represent the direct object of the verb. The participial phrase could also include the modifiers of the participle and complement.

- ☺ Carefully reading the fine print (participle and direct object, plus modifiers)

Usage of Present Participles

When you see a verb that has been put into the –ing form, ask yourself whether that verb is being used as part of a verb phrase (the dog is barking), as a noun (the barking is annoying), as an adjective (the barking dog), or as the head of a participial phrase (barking furiously, the dog scared the burglar). If the –ing word is the head of a participial phrase, look for the subject of the participle, and make sure that the participial phrase is modifying its subject.

You can use a participial phrase at the beginning of a sentence, but only if the subject of the participle is also the subject of the sentence:

- ☺ Shivering in the cold, he waited for the doors to open.

A misplaced participial phrase can end up modifying the wrong noun:

- ☹ A woman found the body walking along the path. (Misplaced modifier, unless this sentence describes a scene from a zombie apocalypse.)

This confusion results from the fact that adjectival phrases usually modify the noun that directly precedes them. One way to fix the problem is to move the participial phrase so that it directly follows the noun it modifies:

- ☺ A woman walking along the path found the body.

In the following example, you merely need to insert a comma:

- ☹ He threw a brick at the window breaking the glass.
- ☺ He threw a brick at the window, breaking the glass.

A dangling participial phrase is one whose subject is missing from the sentence:

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

To fix a dangling modifier, you need to add the subject:

- ☺ Walking to school today, I dropped my book in the mud.

However, adding the subject fixes only part of the problem in that sentence. A participial phrase is supposed to be adjectival, which means that it is supposed to describe a noun. But if you want to say how or when or why something happened, you are really modifying a verb or a clause or a sentence. Thus, you would need to use an adverbial modifier, not an adjectival modifier. One way to do that is to turn that participial phrase into an adverbial clause, by adding an auxiliary verb to turn the participial phrase into a verb phrase, then adding the participle's subject to turn the phrase into a clause, and then adding the subordinating conjunction *while*:

- ☺ While I was walking to school today, I dropped my book in the mud.

In the following example, the writer used a participial phrase in an attempt to express how something was done:

- ☹ The patients were assigned to treatment groups using a random number generator.

If a participial phrase follows a noun, it will seem to modify that noun. As a result, it seems that the treatment groups, not the investigators, were using the random number generator. There are several possible ways to fix that sentence. One is to turn the participle into the main verb of the sentence, in either the active or passive voice:

- ☺ We used a random number generator to assign patients to treatment groups. (Active voice, first person)
- ☺ The investigators used a random number generator to assign patients to treatment groups. (Active voice, third person)
- ☺ A random number generator was used to assign patients to treatment groups. (Passive voice)

Another way is to add a preposition (by)—thus turning the participial phrase into an adverbial prepositional phrase—and make the appropriate adjustments:

- ☺ We assigned the patients to treatment groups by using a random number generator.

Laurie Endicott Thomas is the author of Not Trivial: How Studying the Traditional Liberal Arts Can Set You Free. She blogs at www.nottrivial.blogspot.com.

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