Description

Before we address the grammatical error of dangling participles in a sentence, it is important to understand the role of a *participle* in a sentence. Participles can have more than one job, but the role that most often leads to the problem of dangling occurs when verbs are changed to look like adjectives, e.g., *speed* is a verb, whereas *speeding* is a present participle (participles can be in present or past tense). The phrase “a speeding car” illustrates the use of a participle to *modify* the noun that follows (in this case, the car).

Participial Phrases

English grammar rules are full of terminologies that are often not as complicated as you might think. In this instance, a participial phrase is simply a word group that contains a participle that modifies the subject of the sentence. A present participle would include an *–ing* form, whereas a past participle would include an *–en* or *–ed* form. Let us look at some examples:

Present-Participial Phrases:

- *Lying in the grass*, I marveled at the clouds. “Lying in the grass” is the present participial phrase that modifies the subject, “I.” “Lying” is the present participle in the phrase “Lying in the grass.” It describes what is being performed.

Past-Participial Phrases:

- *Invented by an Indiana housewife in 1889*, the first dishwasher was driven by a steam engine (sentence order could also be reversed).
- *Driven by a steam engine,* the first dishwasher was invented by an Indiana housewife in 1889.

Correcting Dangling Participles

When you leave your participial phrase with no proper subject in sight, you have a dangling participle. Grammar purists consider this to be a major transgression. For your reader, the sentence will feel clumsy at best, and totally confusing at worst. For example:

> *Screaming in pain, the nurse quickly wrapped her arms around the child.*

As written, the participle (screaming) suggests that it was the nurse who was screaming in pain; however, the writer clearly intended to convey that the child was screaming in pain, prompting the nurse to wrap her arms around him or her. To correct the lack of a subject connected to the dangling participle, the sentence should be re-written as follows:

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The nurse quickly wrapped her arms around the screaming child.

Simple Corrections

Correcting dangling participles can be a simple task. Making the doer of the action the subject of the sentence, adding omitted or implied words, or changing the phrase to a subordinate clause can make your writing much less confusing:

Incorrect: Referring to your request of January 5th, the matter is being reviewed by our board.

Correct: Our board is reviewing your request of January 5th.

Incorrect: Exhausted and bleary-eyed, the report was finished by the sales team in the early hours of the morning. (Have you ever seen a bleary-eyed and exhausted report?)

Correct: The sales team, exhausted and bleary-eyed, finished the report in the early hours of the morning.

Dangling participles occur as a result of writing too quickly and not re-examining your work. Always take the extra time to review your work before submission rather than leaving it up to your reader to figure out the meaning of the sentence.

Category

1. Language & Grammar
2. Reporting Research

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