

Dangling Participles

Easy to Construct, Easy to Avoid

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Dangling participles are common grammatical constructions that can be identified in many literary works of historical significance. While the general use of dangling participles is grammatically objectionable, there are broad uses in which the implied subject is perfectly clear. This article uses examples from literature, the media, and corpus data to examine the different cases in which dangling participles are found while simultaneously providing guidance to those seeking greater clarity in their writing.

While researching about grammar, dangling participles called my attention. A dangling participle occurs when a dependent clause is reduced so that the subject is left out, but the subject of the second clause does not correspond with the implied subject of the first. Despite being ungrammatical, dangling participles are easy to construct, easy to understand, and therefore easy to overlook. For example, because it's simple to understand that *I* was the one choosing a topic for my article, not the dangling participles, most readers would skip through my opening sentence without recognizing the grammatical error. Nevertheless, correctly placing a reduced clause in front of the noun it meaningfully modifies is essential in order to preserve the clarity of one's writing. Luckily, once understood, dangling participles are as easy to avoid as they are to construct. Therefore, for anyone seeking to be a careful writer or speaker, it is worth taking a moment to learn the ins and outs of the dangling participle. Throughout this article, I will review in depth what a dangling participle is, examine the literary uses of dangling participles, and provide examples from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) as well as the media to help readers and writers understand this grammar principle.

Reference Grammar

A participle clause is a dependent clause that uses the participle form of a verb. This construction becomes a dangling participle when the clause is reduced so that the subject is left out, and the implied subject of the clause does not match the subject of the main clause it modifies. For example, the following sentence from *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of English Usage* illustrates how to correctly begin a sentence with a participle clause: "Happening to meet Sir Adam Ferguson, I presented him to Dr. Johnson" (1994, p. 314). In this sentence, the implied subject of the first clause (I) matches the actual subject of the main clause (I) and is therefore correct. However, when an author is inattentive, it is extremely easy to mistakenly attach the clause to a noun it does not modify, as demonstrated in this example: "After years of being lost under a pile of dust, Walter P. Stanley . . . found all the old records of the Bangor Lions Club" (Merriam-Webster, 1994, p. 315). The writer of this sentence implies that it was Walter P. Stanley, not the records, that had been lost under a pile of dust for years, which would be rather unfortunate for Walter if it were true (Merriam-Webster, 1994, p. 315). Careful writing in such instances can save an author from an unintentionally humorous sentence.

Nevertheless, authors who leave their participles dangling are in good company. *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of English Usage* (1994) observes that this construction is “both common and of considerable historical and literary background,” citing studies that “have found it as far back as Chaucer, [as well as] . . . in the writings of sixty-eight authors from Shakespeare to Robert Louis Stevenson” (p. 314). The historical prevalence of dangling participles is demonstrated by the high volume of famous authors who have made this unintentional error. The following examples, all included in *Merriam-Webster*, illustrate this point. Jane Austen in *Mansfield Park* says, “Wanting to be alone with his family, the presence of a stranger superior to Mr. Yates must have been irksome” (p. 315). Richard Nixon, as cited in the *New York Times*, says, “Speaking as an old friend, there has been a disturbing tendency in statements emanating from Peking to question the good faith of President Reagan” (p. 314). According to the *Oxford Dictionary of English Grammar*, even Shakespeare in *Hamlet* creates a dangling participle when he writes, “Sleeping in mine orchard, a serpent stung me” (Chalker, 1998, p. 182). Each of these literary and historical examples illustrate that the dangling participle is truly easily constructed and easily overlooked. However, although it may be common, grammar experts still advise against dangling participles for the sake of clarity because it misleads the reader “into attaching the modifier to a subject which it does not meaningfully modify” (Merriam-Webster, 1994, p. 314). When one determines that an error has been made, a dangling participle can be fixed simply by introducing the implied subject back into the reduced dependent clause or by rearranging the sentence so the main subject matches the implied subject.

Literature Review

Academic scholars similarly note the commonality of the dangling participle, even in good writing. Russell (1935), a prominent authority on the English language, agrees that there is “abundant illustration that dangling participles have been in existence for a long time” (p. 113). Because these illustrations are indeed so plentiful, Russell proposes that there are a number of participles that are general enough that their use in dangling constructions is considered unobjectionable (p. 113). These participles include *assuming, leaving, looking, making, returning and turning, speaking, taking, and remembering*. Therefore, Russell argues that examples using these general participles should be included in grammar textbooks. For example, textbooks typically use sentences such as “Coming to a bend in the

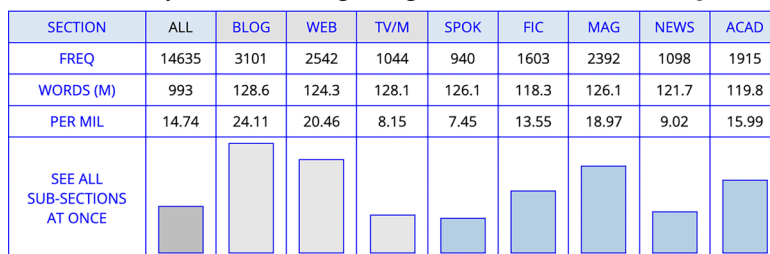
road, a beautiful house struck my eye” to demonstrate the issue presented by a dangling participle (p. 114). And while Russell agrees such sentences are glaringly erroneous, he urges the inclusion of acceptable dangling participles as seen in sentences like the following: “Looking now more closely at the first volume, the format is of great dignity” (p. 115). This argument is supported by other grammarians, such as Bartlett (1953), who writes that “this construction is usually censured by grammarians, but on account of its easy formation it is in wide use and is even an approved natural English expression wherever the reference is quite general and indefinite,” thus acknowledging both the commonality of dangling participles and their acceptable use in general statements (p. 353).

Corpus Examples

Examining the usage of dangling participles supports the argument that certain constructions are unobjectionable. For instance, as stated above, words such as *assuming* in a dangling construction are considered acceptable. In COCA, out of the first ten sentences beginning with *assuming*, five could be considered dangling participles. One example reads, “Assuming there is no chemical reaction that can break off the chlorine, the chlorine stays in your body” (Meadowlark, 2009). Because the participle *assuming* has no subject, it could mistakenly modify the subject of the second clause, *the chlorine*. Therefore, it is technically dangling because chlorine cannot assume anything and is not the intended subject of the clause. However, as argued by Russell (1935), words such as *assuming* when used in dangling constructions are indefinite enough that the intended meaning is clear. In this case, *assuming* is used in a general sense to establish what the audience should know and there is no danger of ambiguity. Sentences such as the following further illustrate the prevalence of dangling participles in broad usages: “Assuming that the prediction is correct, this is the sort of news that can, and will, be easily misconstrued” (Totten, 2012). These general constructions are equally frequent in most forms of written and spoken English. Figure 1 from COCA shows the number of sentences beginning with the word *assuming* in different types of writing; from the first ten sentences within each category, at least half of the examples are dangling participles. Therefore, in the following graph, approximately half of the examples shown are dangling participles, which suggests that the grammatical construction is in common use.

Figure 1

COCA Results for Sentences Beginning With the Word Assuming



Media Examples

As demonstrated by the corpus, general constructions with dangling participles are common in spoken and written English and can be found in most forms of media. Most of the sentences I found were constructed correctly, as demonstrated by this excerpt from the *Rolling Stone*: “Having long ignored classic country, he now found himself drawn to the deceptive simplicity of its lyrics” (Epstein, 2018). However, since these constructions are used so often, mistakes are bound to slip through even in edited work, as seen in an article by the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*: “Having visited the area for all three reasons over the years, it can be hard to tell you where to start” (Brown, 2014). On the web, in largely unedited work, errors are even more prevalent. A Reddit user shared, “Having attempted painting while under the influence of LSD myself, the drawings themselves seem pretty legit” (User Old_fox, 2012). Although the author simply meant to share their personal experience with drug use and art, they inadvertently personified the drawings by implying the drawings can both use illegal drugs and dabble in painting themselves.

Conclusion

Dangling participles have a considerable background in the English language; naturally, their use will continue in the future as well. In the end, conscientious writers must decide for themselves whether their dangling construction is general and acceptable or unclear and ambiguous. Carefully and attentively avoiding ambiguous dangling constructions allows a writer to preserve the clarity and credibility of their writing.

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