

Grammar Worksheets: Misplaced and Dangling Participles

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Many students do not understand the difference between a participle and a gerund. Here is the answer:

Gerund: A verb form used as a noun. It ends in ing – always.
Participle: A verb form used as an adjective. It usually ends in ing, en, or ed.

However, a gerund and a participle may look exactly the same, like so:

Gerund: Laughing makes me cry sometimes.
Participle: Laughing, Julio stumbled out of the bar.

Gerunds take care of themselves. Rarely do students write confusing sentences using gerunds. Participles, however, can “dangle” or be misplaced.

Dangling Participle: Slipping on the wet sidewalk, the keys fell from Amaury’s pocket.

This sentence reads as if the keys slipped on the wet sidewalk. Dangling and misplaced participles often give rise to absurdly humorous scenarios. A “dangling participle” has no noun in the sentence to which the participle would logically attach. A “misplaced participle” does have a noun, but that noun does not come directly after the participle, thus creating a confusing sentence. For our purposes, “dangling” and “misplaced” are equivalent.

How Do We Correct a Misplaced or Dangling Participle?

Given the infinite combinations and permutations available in the English language, we have several ways of correcting a misplaced or dangling participle. We will illustrate, however, only three.

1. Turn the Misplaced or Dangling Participle Into a Dependent Clause.

This means that you take the ing word (the participle), give it a subject, turn it into a verb, and attach it to the main clause. Let’s take the example above, with Amaury’s unfortunate slip on the wet sidewalk.

Correct: When Amaury slipped on the wet sidewalk, the keys fell from his pocket.

Here we have taken the original participial phrase (Slipping on the wet sidewalk), and we have turned it into a dependent clause. We understand that “Amaury slipped,” not the keys.

2. Make the Thing Being Modified by the Participle, the Subject of the Main Clause.

This means we take what is being modified by the ing phrase and place it first in the sentence, right after the comma. Again, let’s use the example of Amaury’s unfortunate slip.

Correct: Slipping on the wet sidewalk, Amaury lost his keys when they fell from his pocket.

Note that “Amaury,” the person, NOT “Amaury’s keys” is placed after the comma. You may be tempted to write “Amaury’s keys,” but then you would have the same problem. Keys, even “Amaury’s keys,” do not slip on wet sidewalks; people, like Amaury, do.

3. Place the Participle as Close as Logically Possible to the Noun it Modifies.

Misplaced: Crying and screaming, Mrs. Williams led three-year old Mindy away from the toy store.

Correct: Mrs. Williams led three-year old Mindy, crying and screaming, away from the toy store.

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Exercises: Rewrite each sentence to eliminate any misplaced or dangling participles.

1. Shaken, not stirred, James Bond likes his martinis.

2. While driving to the Homestead Campus, a pillow fell from James's car.

3. Shocked by the foul language on television, the remote control dropped from Aunt Sherry's hand.

4. Running across Tropical Park, the paddle boats on the lake appeared to be floating on air.

5. Attacked by the school bully, the backpack fell from Abner's shoulder.

6. Walking barefoot through the tall grass, dew drops felt good between my toes.

7. Driven by insatiable ambition and greed, the computer ran Henry's stock trading program all day.

8. Confused by the new layout of the house, the soiled diaper fell off the baby as he cried and ran from room to room.

9. Staring up at the tall buildings, the wallet fell from Jasmine's purse.
