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# DANGLING MODIFIERS

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## Introduction

In the last few months, we have been focussing on many new aspects of grammar. I hope you have enjoyed venturing into these new frontiers of grammar rules with an aim to improve and master your English language proficiency. This month, I would like to introduce you to another common error in writing and speaking, i.e. the dangling modifiers.

## What are Dangling Modifiers?

Well, dangling modifiers are phrases or words that are used which **modify** a word that is unclearly specified in a sentence. Study the sentences below:

- Hungry, the leftover food was gobbled within seconds!
- Having completed the assignment, the TV was switched on.

If you study the sentences above, you will be left wondering – **Who** ate the food? Similarly we are left wondering “**Who** completed the assignment?” and “**Who** switched on the laptop?” All the above sentences show the actions (e.g.

having completed) but does not identify the “doer” of the action. To make the sentences clearer, we need to **add the subject of the main clause**. Now study the corrected version of the sentences given below:

- Hungry, James gobbled the leftover food within seconds!
- Having completed the assignment, Sarjit switched on the TV.

So a dangling modifier is often a word or a phrase that helps to modify a word that is not clearly stated in the sentence. In short, a modifier provides more information – it describes, clarifies, or gives more detail about a concept. Remember to fix a dangling modifier requires more than just adding a subject or rearranging the words in the sentence. You will need to provide more clarity to the sentence by adding something new so that the modifier finally has a target word/subject to describe.

Generally, dangling modifiers are often the cause of errors among many students’ writing and speaking activities. Students are often confused

as to what and who is being described in the sentence. A modifier, when used appropriately, provides useful details by changing, restricting, or adding information in a sentence. Hence, it describes a notion within a given sentence. However, in an instance of dangling modifiers, the modifiers are included but the target is overlooked. In this section, we are going to look at some examples of dangling modifiers with the purpose to help you use these modifiers correctly.

## Common dangling modifiers

An example of a dangling modifier is **the gentle**. When used in a sentence, it alone does not make sense as the reader does not know *who* or *what* is “gentle” referring to. Hence, leaving the modifier – “gentle” dangling, as there is no target word used to assist the phrase. In fact, to correct this sentence, a target word needs to be added to clearly specify what is being described in the sentence. For instance, **the gentle mountain slope** or **the gentle sea breeze**.

Another example is **the calm**. Once again it is not clear what **the calm** refers to. In fact, it is a mere description, with the subject missing. In this situation, it is unknown what the feeling calm is related to. Therefore, when an intended subject is added, the following sentence can be constructed which rectifies the initial sentence. For example, **the calm wind** or **Kumar’s calm face**. In everyday situations, it is clearly noticeable that the sentence **the gentle** or **the calm** is incorrect but sentences can sometimes be complex especially when used in past and present participles, phrases or clauses.

## Dangling participles

Dangling participles can consist of

present and past participles. Dangling present participles occur when sentences do not include the subject and have “-ing” words within the sentence. For instance, dancing, drinking and hiking. Dangling past participles lack a subject and have “-ed” or “-en” words in the sentence. For example, bathed, hoped, beaten, eaten, etc.

## Examples of dangling present participles:

### 1. Running down the trail, the Scots Pine Tree were a luscious green.

Based on the sentence above, the *Scots Pine Tree* which is a sub species of a tree was running down the trail. Hence, to correct this sentence, the target word/subject has to be used to clearly specify who was running down the trail and what they observed. Therefore, we can say that: *Running down the trail, Marina saw that the Scots Pine Tree were a luscious green.*

### 2. Searching the backpack, moisturising lotion couldn’t be located.

The lack of inclusion of who or what *searching the backpack* positions the sentence to be unclear. As in this instance, it seems as if the *moisturising lotion* which *couldn’t be located* is the one *searching the backpack*, which is impossible to achieve. Now, study this improved sentence: *Searching his backpack, Kamila still couldn’t locate the moisturising lotion.*

## Some examples of dangling past participles:

### 3. Alarmed by the state of affairs, something had to be done to solve the mistakes.

In this sentence, readers could interpret that *something* is *alarmed* by the state of affairs. In this context, the *something*

is neither a subject nor object hence, the sentence being unclear. To rewrite the sentence, the following can be said: *Alarmed by the state of affairs, they felt obligated to solve their mistakes. Or Ayesha, who was alarmed by the state of affairs, solved the mistakes.*

### 4. Hungry, the leftover nasi lemak on the table was consumed.

The subject in this sentence is missing, as who is capable of feeling hungry and has the ability to consume the *nasi lemak* was not clearly outlined. Therefore, to correct this sentence, it can be rewritten as: *Amin who was hungry consumed the leftover nasi lemak located on the table.*

## Dangling modifier clause

A modifier clause that is dangling is a common error. This occurs due to the complexity of the sentence. In a typical and correct sentence with the use of modifier clause, it is most commonly attached to either the end or the beginning of a sentence and then attached to the subject. For instance, jogging down the sidewalk at Taman Masria (clause), Li Pen (subject) observed the beautiful hills (object). However, when the subject is absent, or the clause is merely attached to the object without a subject separating them, the modifier clause is “dangling” thus having an unclear notion within the sentence. Some examples of dangling clauses are as follows:

### 5. When it starts boiling, remove the noodles from the pan and transfer it to the plate.

In this instance, the subject intended is missing hence, the sentence having an unclear notion. Although, the *it* at the beginning of the sentence refers to the *noodles*, grammatically not



mentioning *noodles*, the sentence lacks precision. Now study this improved sentence.

**When the noodles start boiling, remove them from the pan and transfer them to the plate.**

Here is another example:

**6. Reaching home after a long drive, the sun sets.**

In this sentence, the sun appears to be the intended subject. However, the sun is unable to *drive* or *reach home*. Therefore, the subject is likely that of a human which was not mentioned in the subject that has the ability to observe the sun setting and *drive*. Therefore, to rectify this sentence, it can be rewritten as: *Reaching home after a long drive, Natasha observes the sun setting.*

#### Dangling modifier phrase

Danglers are hard to spot when writing because we do not necessarily always write what we mean to express. Therefore, it is understood by the writer but not always by the reader. Dangling modifier phrases can be sub categorised as dangling gerund phrase or as dangling prepositional phrase. A gerund when used are words ending in "ing". Gerunds usually act as nouns rather than adjectives. A prepositional phrase is a modifying phrase that consists of an object and a preposition. It can be used as a group of words that lacks a subject. However, for a sentence to be complete, a subject has to be used as it will complete the action of who or what is experiencing the described prepositional phrase. Some examples of these dangling phrases are as below:

#### Examples of dangling gerund:

**7. Feeling like a million dollars, her legs felt better after three weeks of ongoing physiotherapy treatment.**  
In this sentence, *her legs* were not feeling like a million dollars, but rather the person who is the subject that is capable of interpreting feelings and thought. The legs are just physical tools used by the human body to assist the subject. Therefore, to correct the sentence, a clear substitute of the subject has to be integrated into the

sentences as below: *Feeling like a million dollars, she was so thrilled that her legs felt better after three weeks of ongoing physiotherapy treatment.*

#### Example of dangling prepositional phrase:

**8. With a huff of anger, the expensive and branded kurta and turban was returned to the shop due to the incompetent stitching.**

Through the use of prepositional phrases such as "with a huff of anger" followed by the *kurta, turban* and *shop*, there is an absence of the subject in the sentence. Thus, the feeling of anger is an emotion felt by no one as the tie and the shop lack emotion. Now, the above sentence can be rewritten as below: **With a huff of anger, Manjit Singh had to return the expensive and branded kurta and turban to the shop due to the incompetent stitching.**

#### Dangling infinitives

Infinitives are words that have "to" attached to a verb. For example, **to run, to sleep, to love**. It is important to note that infinitives are not verbs and can be used as adverbs, nouns or adjectives. For instance, to eat (infinitive) is the only thing Aminah (subject) wants to do after working a double shift at Pak Nasir's Restaurant (object). This sentence is equipped with a subject, an infinitive along with an object. However, in a case of dangling infinitives, the infinitive "hangs" and is poorly attached to the subject. An example of this is as follows:

**9. To cook the meal properly, the recipe must be followed precisely, and once done transferred onto a plate for the judges to evaluate.**

In this instance, *the recipe* appears to be the one cooking the meal which is inaccurate. Therefore, to rewrite this sentence, the following can be said.

**To cook the meal properly, participants must follow the recipe precisely, and once done, transfer the meal onto a plate for the judges to evaluate.**

#### Conclusion

In conclusion, I hope this article on dangling modifiers has shed some light to students in becoming more conscientious writers. Being aware of such grammar rules and diligently making attempts to correct your speech and writing will make you a better language learner. So, continue learning and improving yourself. Best of luck! 🍀

Simple Present	Simple Past	Simple Future
Ali <b>walks</b> to school from Monday to Friday.	Last week, Ali <b>walked</b> to school from Monday to Friday.	Ali <b>will usually walk</b> to school from Monday to Friday.
Present Continuous (uses -ing)	Past Continuous	Future Continuous
I <b>am walking</b> to school at the moment.	I <b>was walking</b> to school when I saw the accident yesterday.	I <b>will be walking</b> to school from Monday to Friday.
Present Perfect (uses has, have, had, will)	Past Perfect	Future Perfect
They <b>have walked</b> to school for so long now.	They <b>had walked</b> to school for at least 3 years by the time I was twelve years old.	They <b>will have walked</b> to school for at least two semesters by the end of the year.
Present Perfect Continuous (uses has, have, had, will + been)	Past Perfect Continuous	Future Perfect Continuous
Kim <b>has been walking</b> to school since I was in Year 6 Primary.	Kim <b>had been walking</b> to school for at least a year before his younger sister joined his school.	Kim <b>will have been walking</b> to school for at least three years before my next birthday.