

## Eschew Obfuscation: Don't Leave Me Hanging! by Faye Roberts

In learning to write better, sometimes it's not *what* you say but *where* you put the words. Misplaced or dangling modifiers, or "danglers," are phrases that are placed too far from the word they are intended to modify—they're left hanging.

Although these constructions are not wrong in themselves, their misplacement can lead to confusion and unintended humor. Here are a few representative examples of modifiers placed too far from the word they were intended to clarify:

Example 1. *Splashing desperately, the dock seemed even farther away.* The subject of this sentence—the swimmer—is unnamed, making it seem as if the dock were doing the splashing.

Example 2. *Fired from the task force, the lieutenant told Marla to clear out her desk.* It's not clear who lost the job—the lieutenant or Marla.

Example 3. *With a light chestnut coat and a flaxen mane, Jim knew this was the horse he wanted.* It's possible that Jim owns a chestnut-colored jacket and actually has flaxen hair himself, but it's more likely the description matches the horse.

Example 4. *To make our fundraising goal this year, more boxes of cookies must be sold.* This sentence isn't especially ambiguous because we all know those cookies won't sell themselves. Still, it's a sloppy construction.

Example 5. *Empty garbage cans and loose trash blowing down the street, Gwen was startled by the gusty wind.* (Of course the actions of the wind are being described, not Gwen's.)

In "Everything You Wanted to Know about Danglers but Were Too Afraid to Ask," James Harbeck explains that danglers are short phrases "used at the start of a sentence to describe something, but that something is not the subject doing the main action of the sentence." Such phrases are not really attached to the text that follows, so they are said to "dangle."

Fixing a dangler often involves recasting the sentence in which it appears. Each of the examples above represents a different type of dangler. Here is an explanation of those types, along with more coherent alternatives.

### Present Participles

A participle is a type of verb that is used as an adjective. Present



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participles are usually formed by adding *-ing*. The words *running*, *smoking*, *fishing*, and *stabbing* can all be present participles and serve as adjectives as in *running water*, *smoking gun*, *fishing boat*, *stabbing pain*. In Example 1—*Splashing desperately, the dock seemed even farther away*—the present participle *splashing* refers to someone who isn't named. The sentence would be clearer if that person were identified:

*Although he was splashing desperately, the dock seemed even farther away.*

### Past Participles

Past participles use the past form of verbs. Example 2 contains a past participle: *Fired from the task force, the lieutenant told Marla to clear out her desk.* This sentence is confusing because *lieutenant* is placed closer to the participle, *fired*, than is *Marla*; as a result, it's difficult to determine the subject. If Marla is the one who got the ax, a better version would be:

*When Marla was fired from the task force, the lieutenant told her to clear out her desk.*

Depending on the individual verbs used, past participles may have various endings, e.g., *-d*, *-ed*, *-en*, *-n*, or *-t*. Here are some appropriate uses of past participles as adjectives:

*Grace, calm and composed, walked confidently to the podium.* The past participle *composed* modifies the subject, *Grace*.

*Exhausted, she collapsed on the sofa.* The past participle *exhausted* modifies the subject, *she*.

*Broken glass littered the street after the crash.* The past participle *broken* modifies the subject, *glass*.

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Faye Roberts ([www.FayeRobertsEdits.com](http://www.FayeRobertsEdits.com)) is an independent copyeditor and proofreader of fiction and nonfiction. A former librarian, she lives in the north Florida and metro Atlanta areas. Faye is a member of the Editorial Freelancers Association, ACES: The Society for Editing, and Sisters in Crime.

## Eschew Obfuscation, continued

*Forbidden* love can lead to a tragic outcome. The past participle *forbidden* modifies the subject, *love*.

The white paint looked like *spilt* milk. The past participle *spilt* modifies the noun, *milk*.

**Prepositional Phrases.** In Example 3—*With a light chestnut coat and a flaxen mane, Jim knew this was the horse he wanted*—the dangler is a prepositional phrase. The preposition *with* has two objects here: *coat* and *flaxen*. This problem is similar to that in Example 2: the subject *horse* is too far from the modifier. A better version would be:

*Jim knew the horse with a light chestnut coat and a flaxen mane was the one he wanted.*

**Dangling Infinitives.** Participles aren't the only modifiers that can be misplaced. Example 4 illustrates a placement problem with an infinitive: *To make our fundraising goal this year, more boxes of cookies must be sold.*

In English, the infinitive is formed by the word *to* + a verb. The tricky bit is that, while infinitives contain a verb, they don't act like verbs. Instead, they can act like nouns, adjectives, or adverbs. In Example 4, the infinitive phrase *To make our fundraising goal this year* functions as a noun, but it's a noun without a corresponding verb. That makes it a dangler. To fix it, the sentence should be recast.

*If we are to make our fundraising goal this year, more boxes of cookies must be sold.*

Now *we* is the subject, *are* is its corresponding verb, and the phrase *to make our fundraising goal this year* describes what we are to do.

**Other modifiers.** In Example 5 we find still another type of misplaced modifier: *Empty garbage cans and loose trash blowing down the street, Gwen was startled by the gusty wind.* Of course, Gwen isn't a garbage can or trash, and she was unlikely to be

### Resources

It's easy to find information on danglers and other misplaced modifiers online. Here are a few useful websites.

Grammar Girl, "Funny Misplaced Modifiers" <https://www.quickanddirtytips.com/education/grammar/funny-misplaced-modifiers>

Grammar Revolution, "What Is a Misplaced Modifier?" <https://www.english-grammar-revolution.com/misplaced-modifier.html>

James Harbeck, "Everything You Wanted to Know about Danglers but Were Too Afraid to Ask": <http://theweek.com/articles/444024/everything-wanted-know-about-danglers-but->

blowing down the street. A smoother solution would be:

*Gwen was startled by the gusty wind that blew empty garbage cans and loose trash down the street.*

If you find danglers in your writing, don't despair. They happen to the best writers. *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of English Usage* notes that misplaced modifiers have been spotted in the works of Shakespeare and Jane Austen as well as in major political speeches.

Misplaced modifiers seem to occur more frequently in writing that is compact. They are also likely to occur when writers are under deadlines or are dealing with more than one modifier in the same sentence.

If you goof and write a howler, you may get teased about it. Just try to avoid anything like Groucho Marx's famous set-up line, "One morning I shot an elephant in my pajamas."



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