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CHAPTER 15 : PARTICIPLE PHRASES

SYNTAX

If you are telling a friend that you listen to jazz and relax in the evenings, you might say, "While I relax in the evenings, I listen to jazz." You might even tighten it somewhat as we have already seen and say, "While relaxing in the evenings, I listen to jazz." Now we will see that there is way to make the clause even tighter, a way which will reduce that clause to a phrase: **Relaxing in the evenings, I listen to jazz.**

Notice that what we have done here is to drop the subject and the subordinating conjunction and to add an *-ing* to the base verb form. When we add the *-ing* to the verb, the verb can no longer be the predicate in the sentence. It can be combined with the verb **be** to make a progressive tense, but it cannot stand alone as the predicate of the sentence. A predicate contains the ability to tell the time of an action, and even though the **verb + -ing** is called a present participle, it does not indicate present time or any other time. What a present participle does is to say that the predicate that it is made from was an intransitive verb or a transitive verb in active voice.

Intransitive:

I **raced** down the stairs. I collided with the college president.

Racing down the stairs, I collided with the college president.

Transitive active:

I **broke** the bottle of dye. I realized that I was wearing my only white shirt.

Breaking the bottle of dye, I realized that I was wearing my only white shirt.

From previous chapters, you probably also remember the past participle. We have already seen it used as part of the predicate in making the perfect tenses (*have danced, had grown*) and in making passive voice (*were boxed, was eaten*). Just as the present participle can be used to begin a participle phrase, so too can the past participle. Used to begin a participle phrase, the past participle indicates not past aspect, but that the predicate that it is made from was a transitive verb in the passive voice.

Transitive passive:

The bicycle **was broken** years ago. The bicycle remains in a corner of the garage.

Broken years ago, the bicycle remains in a corner of the garage.

Participle phrases are often seen as reductions of independent or dependent clauses. So *Coming from the southwest* might come from *This wind is coming from the southwest*, or *which is coming from the southwest*. Generally grammarians see participle phrases as reductions of relative clauses, and therefore consider them adjectival.

Relative clause: Bob is the man **who is wearing the Hawaiian shirt**.

Participle phrase: Bob is the man **wearing the Hawaiian shirt**.

But some participle phrases seem to be reduced adverb clauses, so some grammarians see some participle phrases functioning adverbially.

Adverb Clause: **While he was listening to the lecture**, the student fell asleep.

Participle phrase: **Listening to the lecture**, the student fell asleep.

We will diagram participle phrases as adjectives, but you will probably find some that you think might be diagrammed as adverbs.

DANGLING MODIFIERS

Understanding that participle phrases can be seen as reductions of clauses can help you avoid the **dangling modifier**, a very common problem. If I begin a sentence *Wanting only peace and quiet*, you expect the subject that follows to be a person or animal, something capable of wanting peace and quiet. If instead, I continue . . . *the bus roared down the street*, you will be momentarily confused. The sentence syntax is not working the way that the language-understanding part of the brain expects. The expectation is that a participle phrase at the beginning of a sentence must come from a clause that has the same subject as the subject of the base sentence. If it comes from a clause with a different subject, you have a dangling participle.

Jerome thought about his future.

Jerome entered the employment office.

Thinking about his future, Jerome entered the employment office.

Jerome was looking desperately for work.

The job board was empty.

ØLooking desperately for work, the job board was empty.

This same rule also holds true for infinitives and gerunds, but the mistake is less common in those constructions. It is participles that usually give us problems; we know what we mean, so we do not stop to think about what we have actually said. Historically, the dangling participle has always been around, and in spoken English dangling participles are not unforgivable, but they are best eliminated from written English.

Placement of Participle Phrases

Participle phrases are understood to work as adjectives even when they seem to have very adverbial meanings such as the examples of present participles above. You may remember from the chapter on adjectives that participles can be used just like any adjective that comes after an article and before the noun that it modifies.

The **broken** window
The **crying** child

However, when the participles are not single words but the beginning of a participle phrase, the placement is different.

1. At the beginning of the sentence:

Looking for signs of bombings during the war, the tourists approached the munster square.

2. After the noun (but not after the pronoun) that they modify:

The wet rocks, **glistening in the sun**, attracted Maria's attention.
ØThey, **glistening in the sun**, attracted Maria's attention.

3. At the end of the sentence and modifying the subject as long as there is no nearer noun that they might seem to modify

Toan walked on a path near the lake, **listening to the sounds of spring**.

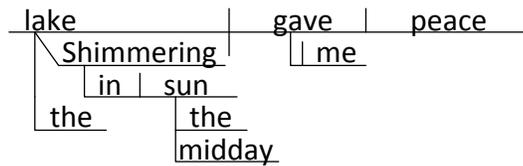
4. At the end of the sentence and modifying the word that they come after

They seemed to indiscriminately mark the trees **growing closest to the road**.

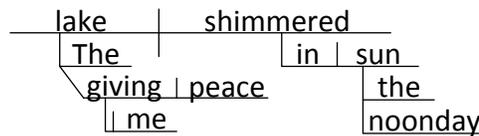
Analyzing and Diagramming Participle Phrases

You may have noticed, in looking at the participle phrases above, that the phrases have prepositional phrases and other words within them. It is now time to see how these participle phrases work internally. Externally, they work as adjectives modifying nouns, but within the phrase itself, participles maintain the same verb qualities that all verbals maintain. They are modified by adverbs, and they can have direct objects, indirect objects, object complements, and subject complements. The best way to see this is to look at diagrams of some sentences.

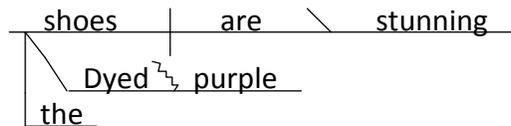
Shimmering in the midday sun, the lake gave me peace.



The lake shimmered in the noonday sun, **giving me peace**.

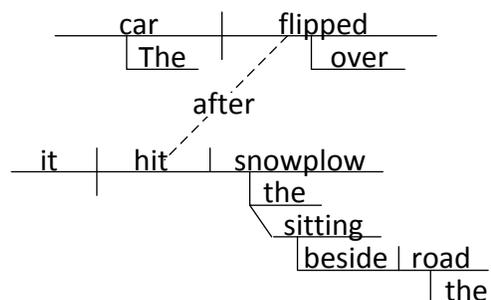


Dyed purple, the shoes are stunning.



Of course, participles can modify in a dependent clause as well as in an independent clause.

The car flipped over **after it hit the snowplow sitting beside the road**.



Participles and Gerunds as Modifiers

We have learned in this chapter that verbs that end in **-ing** and modify a noun are participles. However, there is an exception to this broad statement. We also know that

nouns can work like adjectives, and it turns out that **gerunds** can also work like adjectives. Notice the difference between the following:

The **barking** dog awakened the neighbors.
The **drinking** water was lost at the first portage.

Notice that in the first sentence, barking is what the dog is doing; this is the participle usage that we have been looking at in this chapter. But in the second sentence, the water is not doing the drinking; it is **for** drinking. This is the gerund usage. When the word modified is doing the action of the verb + -ing, we have a participle. When the word modified is used for the verb + -ing, then we have a gerund working as a modifier. In written English, ambiguity is possible, but in spoken English, the gerund gets emphasis and a rise in pitch. Try saying the two above and listening to the difference. Or try these two:

The **walking** stick amazed the audience at the magic show. (participle)
The **walking** stick helped the old man climb down the steep path. (gerund)

The **wading** pool looked like something from Dr. Seuss. (participle)
The children spent the hot afternoon in the **wading** pool. (gerund)

Punctuation

Punctuating the participle phrase is fairly simple. You have probably noticed that the participle phrase at the beginning of the sentence is always set off with a comma. When a participle phrase comes at the end of the sentence and modifies the subject of the sentence, it too is set off with a comma. Participle phrases that come immediately after the word that they modify are punctuated in the same way as relative clauses. If they are restrictive, they are not set off with commas; if they are nonrestrictive, they are set off with commas.

Beginning of sentence: **Ricocheting off the sides of the polished aluminum tube**, the light intensifies.

End of sentence: She stopped in the middle of a thought, **realizing that she had just taken the wrong freeway exit**.

Restrictive: The man **wearing the Hawaiian shirt** is my father.

Nonrestrictive: Humans, **being bipedal**, often have back problems because of their upright position.

RHETORIC

How to Use Participle Phrases Effectively

1. Add Focus to Your Writing

As we have already seen, participle phrases can be used to tighten writing; usually that tightening involves more focused, more forceful sentences. Often the force and focus that we create in speech through a louder voice and through body and facial gestures we create in writing through such syntactic structures as the participle phrase. In fact, the participle phrase is used much more frequently in writing than it is in everyday speech.

When the bell rang at noon, I set off for the piazza. I hoped to find romance.

Hearing the noon bell ring, I set off for the piazza, **hoping to find romance**.

2. Create Verb Power in Adjective Slots

In addition to tightening the focus, the participle phrase, because it is made from a verb, adds verb power to the adjectival modifier.

David Letterman put his hands in his pockets and walked toward the podium.

Putting his hands in his pockets, David Letterman walked toward the podium.

Even though both of these sentences are the same length, notice the added focus on the actions of both *putting* and *walked* in the second sentence. *Walked* is clearly the verb of focus because it is in the independent clause, but *putting* also gets focus because it is now the first word of the sentence. One thing that is lost is a clear sense of when *putting* occurs. Both before and *while* are possible interpretations of the participle phrase; so if clarity about the sequence of events is needed, an independent clause, an adverb clause, or a compound verb might be necessary

3. Add Detail to Your Writing

Also notice that in the previous participle phrase, *putting his hands in his pockets* is a detail added to the general picture: *David Letterman walked to the podium*. Adding detail is one of the most important functions of a participle phrase, and adding detail almost invariably improves your writing.

The kitten played with the ball of yarn, **swatting at it**, **nudging it across the floor**, and **finally unraveling a long piece**.

"She read on, lost, **drowsing, flicking minute creatures from the pages, scratching mechanically at her leg**, where the grass pricked her." [Nadine Gordimer, "The Kindest Thing to Do" *Literature and Its Writers, An Introduction to Fiction, Poetry, and Drama*, ed. Ann Charters (Boston: Bedford Books.1997. 260]

4. Indicate Cause

Indicating cause is another possible function of the participle phrase; usually when the participle phrase indicates cause, it comes before the base sentence, which contains the effect clause.

Hearing that the Nez Perce had escaped, General Howard was furious.

It is also possible, however, for the phrase to come after the subject when cause is indicated.

General Howard, **hearing that the Nez Perce had escaped**, was furious.

The cause can also come after the effect in some sentences, but notice that the sentence loses some of the sense of cause and effect and might be interpreted as meaning simultaneity rather than cause and effect.

Vu examined his cat, **checking for fleas**.

5. Add Energy to a Sentence

As we have said, the participle phrase adds energy to a sentence because of its verb qualities. The present participle phrase also adds energy to a sentence because it ends in an unaccented syllable---*ing*. Because English is a stress language, sentences typically end on a stressed rather than on an unstressed syllable. The sentence needs a place to land, so it keeps rushing on until it finds that landing place. Therefore, present participle phrases are particularly good for describing scenes that contain a lot of action. They are not so good for describing more passive or inactive situations

Streaking down the freeway, cutting in and out of traffic, the ambulance raced for the hospital.

6. Create Coordination and Parallelism

Notice also in the last example that two or more participle phrases can be used in a series; in this case, the series increases the sense of speed. Participle phrases are very effective in a series; when we want to stress action, a series of present participle phrases can produce an almost breakneck speed in the sentence. Present and past

participle phrases can be mixed in a series, and they can be combined with adjective phrases; the phrases can also be balanced both before and after a main clause.

The children raced toward the beach, **testing the icy water, splashing one another, screaming with delight.**

Huddled together for warmth, squeaking from time to time, the cubs awaited the return of their mother.

Rolling up their pant legs, ready for high water, the girls waited for the next breaker.

Dressed in her band uniform, Jeanine walked toward the parade ground, **holding her new flute carefully.**

And, of course, the participle phrases can be balanced between sentences to create parallelism between sentences also.

The male gorilla, **demonstrating his interest,** beats his chest. The female, **indicating her acquiescence,** remains motionless.

15.1 Punctuating Participle Phrases

At the beginning of the sentence, participle phrases are set off by a comma.

Having put on his mended shoe, Thoreau joined a huckleberry party after his night in jail.

At the end of a sentence, when the participle phrase modifies the subject, it is set off with a comma.

Jonathan walked toward the return counter, **practicing his complaint in his mind.**

Restrictive participle phrases are not set off with commas.

A person **wanting to win the lottery** needs to be very lucky.

Nonrestrictive participle phrases are set off by commas.

George Washington, **retiring to Mount Vernon,** had resisted any impulse to be president for life.

A. Sentences to Diagram

1. The mirror frame made from old marbles glistened in the moonlight.
2. The gardener walked through her garden, grumbling about the weeds, carrying a walking stick.
3. Nearing his home, Gene remembered the sad scene awaiting him.
4. Crumbling his shredded wheat, the child waited for the milk.
5. Listening to the music playing on the radio, he enjoyed remembering his past loves.
6. The paper made from old rags lasted for centuries.

7. While she waited for the train coming from the cold mountains to the east, Eileen watched the palm trees blowing in the wind rising off the ocean.
8. Waiting for the train coming from the east, Long watched the clock ticking slowly toward noon.
9. The old picture album, buried beneath piles of yellowed letters, revealed some family secrets long kept in the closet.
10. After the siesta, the women returned to their kitchens, working now on the evening meal.
11. Perched on the branch of the tree, the eagle watched the beach for prey.
12. A small boy walked down the beach, stepping carefully over the slick rocks.
13. Seeing the boy, the eagle left its perch and soared overhead, getting ready for the kill.
14. The boy, checking the rocks for shells washed ashore in the last storm, was unaware of the danger.
15. Watching the scene from the forest above the beach, the boy's father was fascinated by the power and beauty of the eagle.
16. Nearing the boy, the eagle dropped its claws for the catch.
17. Realizing the meaning of what he saw, the father watched, helpless and horrified.
18. The eagle, realizing its mistake, suddenly pulled up.
19. The father, relieved by the sudden shift, sighed thankfully, knowing that his son was now safe.
20. When the boy found a shell emptied of its former inhabitant, he smiled happily, oblivious of his narrow escape.

B. Sentence Combining

Combine each of the following pairs into one sentence that uses one or more participle phrases. Be sure that you keep one main verb in the sentence; if you make all the verbs into participle phrases, you will end up with a sentence fragment. In a few cases, we have starred the sentence that might best serve as the base sentence.

Example

The children peered into the darkness.

The children listened for the loud scratching to come again.

Listening for the loud scratching to come again, the children peered into the darkness.

or

Peering into the darkness, the children listened for the loud scratching to come

again.

or

The children, listening for the loud scratching to come again, peered into the darkness.

or

The children peered into the darkness, listening for the loud scratching to come again.

1. The forward batted the ball toward the basket.
The forward hung suspended in air.
2. Steve Young looked down the field.
He found the place that Jerry Rice would reach in time to catch the ball.
3. The dirt bikes climbed the mountain trail.
The dirt bikes trailed dust.
The dirt bikes roared in the desert air.
4. The clouds streaked across the sky.
The clouds were bringing rain.
5. The espresso was made from an instant mix.
The espresso was extremely sweet.
6. Near the old farm house, the tractor sat abandoned.
The tractor was collecting dust.
The tractor was collecting spiders.
The tractors was collecting bird nests.
7. After the picnic, Chen relaxed in the shade of the trees.
Chen listened vaguely to the conversations around him.
8. The trees on the Monterey Peninsula are battered by ocean winds.
The trees on the Monterey Peninsula are shaped by the ocean winds.
The trees on the Monterey Peninsula stand as sentinels on the western edge of the continent.
9. Gail swam in the cool lake.
Gail felt fish.
The fish were bumping against her legs.

*Gail made her way toward the island.

10. The cows stood in the meadow.

The cows munched grass.

The cows mooed occasionally.

11. The children were ordered to their seats.

The children reluctantly stopped watching the commotion in the hall.

12. The combines moved across the grain-covered hills.

*The combines cut the wheat in broad swaths.

The combines were like giant insects.

13. Salmon swim upstream against the water flow.

Salmon leap fifteen-foot waterfalls.

14. The dams were built to supply water to irrigate desert land.

The dams were built to supply hydroelectric power.

*The dams stop the salmon.

15. After the sunny weather, the seeds begin to sprout.

The seeds poke the dirt up in miniature mountain ridges.

16. The hiker neared the top of the mountain.

The hiker stepped dangerously near the edge.

17. The edge was carved by thousands of years of wind and snow and rain.

The edge scooped back.

*The edge then dropped a thousand feet to the valley floor.

18. The hiker looked at the view.

The view was breathtaking.

The hiker fell to her knees.

19. The wind whistled around her ears.

The wind drowned out the sound of her own heartbeat.

20. The hiker returned to her car.

The hiker was aware that she had had an experience.

The experience was transforming.

C. Sentence Rewriting: Catching the Dangling Modifier

The following sentences contain dangling modifiers. Rewrite the sentences so that the problem is fixed. You might need to invent a subject or use a dependent clause in order to fix the problem.

Example

Peering into the darkness of the cave, a loud scream came from within.

Peering into the darkness of the cave, I heard a loud scream from within.

1. Wanting only peace and quiet, the bus roared down the street.
2. Standing on the corner, shifting from foot to foot, the light finally changed.
3. Not having eaten since breakfast, dinner arrived just before we began eating the salt in the salt shaker.
4. Grounded for two months by her father, anger filled her.
5. Searching through the wreckage left by the earthquake, a four-year-old boy was found by the rescuers.

D. On Your Own

1. Write five sentences that use a participle phrase at the end of the sentence.
(Example: The gardener walked through her garden, grumbling about her weeds.)
2. Write five sentences that use a participle phrase at the beginning of the sentence.
(Example: Crumbling his shredded wheat, the child waited for the milk.)
3. Write five sentences that use a participle phrase between the subject and the verb.
(Example: The old picture album, buried beneath piles of yellowed letters, revealed some family secrets long kept in the closet.)

E. Participle Phrases in Published Writing

Here is a passage by writer Diane Ackerman. Locate the participle phrases in the passage and comment on their use. How might the same information be conveyed without participle phrases? Compare the effects of other possible phrasings with the effect of the original.

A hawk appeared, swooped, grabbed a bat straight out of the sky, and disappeared with it. In a moment, the hawk returned, but hearing his wings coming, the bats all shifted sideways to confuse him, and he missed. As wave upon wave of bats poured out of the cave, their collective wings began to sound like drizzle on autumn leaves. Gushing out and swirling fast in this living Mixmaster, newly risen bats started in close and then veered out almost to the rim of the bowl, climbing until they were high enough to clear the ridge. Already,

a long black column of bats looked like a tornado spinning out far across the Texas sky. A second column formed, undulating and dancing through the air like a Chinese dragon, stretching for miles, headed for some unknown feeding ground. The night was silent except for the serene beating of their wings.

Diane Ackerman, The Moon by Whale Light and Other Adventures among Bats, Penguins, Crocodilians, and Whales (New York: Random House, 1991), 6.

F. Combining in Context

In the following paragraphs, keep the focus and make the writing more effective by using participle phrases at one or more places in the paragraph.

1. Lewis and Clark readied themselves for the trip down the Snake and the Columbia. They made arrangements to leave their horses with the Nez Perce, hired two guides, and made dugout canoes. On October 16, 1805, they entered the Columbia. They passed a burial area on an island. They decided to stop. After they looked briefly at the human bones and wrapped bodies on the burial platform and at the horse bones around the platform, they pushed on. Along the river there were numerous Native American lodges and Native Americans. The Native Americans were splitting and drying the abundant salmon. Lewis and Clark traded trinkets for salmon, roots, and dogs, the latter being the favorite food of the expedition. They neared the big falls of the Columbia. They found the water getting more and more turbulent. At what is today called The Dalles, they had to portage all their food and equipment and lower the boats with lines along the southern edge. One boat got away when the line broke. This caused much excitement among the Indians who were watching and helping the expedition. Once they were below the falls, they found bigger, flatter, and highly decorated ocean-going canoes. They were near their goal, the mouth of the Columbia.
2. One night at Yosemite John Muir watched the moon on a waterfall. At midnight the moonlight made a rainbow 500 feet below where Muir stood. Muir decided to get behind the waterfall and watch the moonlight. The moonlight came through the water. He stepped out onto the rocky edge. He made his way along a ridge that was only six inches wide in one place. Suddenly the wind shifted. It sent water pounding down on Muir's head and shoulders. Muir knelt down. He waited for a chance to move farther back under the falls. He found a rock and a chunk of ice to wedge himself in. Finally the wind shifted again. Muir dashed for freedom. He escaped the ledge and made a fire to warm his numb limbs.

G. Revising Your Writing for Rhetorical Effectiveness

Choose a piece of your own writing and revise it by using participle phrases. Consider

the following questions as you think about revising.

1. Are there places where the writing is repetitious and could be tightened with participle phrases?
2. Are there places where you could make the writing more effective, true, and clear by adding participle phrases?
3. Are there places where you could reinforce the meaning of the sentences by using participle phrases?