

Using Effective Participle Phrases

Participle phrases modify nouns and add information to a sentence. They always function *adjectivally*, meaning they modify the nouns to which they refer. Since they can describe any noun in a sentence, participle phrases help writers to provide readers useful information to clarify examples and add depth to their writing that makes the writing more compelling.

Alluding to Shakespeare, Andrew Tucker writes about two star-crossed lovers in his short story “I Defy the Stars.”

In this example, *alluding to Shakespeare* modifies the subject, *Andrew*. The reader knows, from reading the detail, that Andrew incorporates elements from Shakespeare’s play into his story. This information provides context for the main claim, explaining the significance of Andrew’s choice of subject.

Communication with the Reader

Below are examples of how participle phrases speak to a reader. (The participle phrase is italicized.)

Adding Detail

A participle phrase can add the detail needed to identify nouns within a clause.

The woman *playing guitar* in the coffee shop is named Sarah.

Here, the participle phrase *playing guitar* names which *woman*. Note that, in this example, the phrase follows the noun it modifies rather than appearing at the beginning of the sentence.

Combining Information

Participle phrases can allow us to combine sentences and forge connections between related ideas.

Original: The runner was breathing heavily. He entered the final lap of the race.

Revised: *Breathing heavily*, the runner entered the final lap of the race.

The revised sentence helps readers see the two actions as simultaneous.

Creating Connections

Participle phrases can also create logical connections without adding to the weight of a clause. Look at these two versions of a cause-effect sentence.

Original: Because they have long battled the Anaheim Ducks for the top spot in the Pacific Division of the NHL, the San Jose Sharks' recent acquisition of polarizing forward Raffi Torres has caused a stir and forced many to question the validity of the Sharks' efforts to boost the strength of their team.

Revised: Long battling the Anaheim Ducks for the top spot in the Pacific Division of the NHL, the San Jose Sharks recently acquired polarizing forward Raffi Torres, which caused an immediate stir league-wide concerning the Sharks' efforts to boost the strength of their team.

The first version using a clause modifier to set up the cause-effect relationship grounds the sentence with the full weight of a clause and sets up a focus on the declaration. The second version, using more active verbs throughout, is not so weighted down but still conveys the cause and effect relationship.

The Zoom-In Effect

An additional benefit of using participle phrases is that they can add what is called *effect* to your writing—sensory and emotional detail that makes the subject immediate. An example of this is as follows:

She leaned back into the windup and let the baseball find its natural momentum and trajectory, *arcing and spiraling through the air, consuming the 60 feet and 6 inches between mound and plate at a speed of 95 mph.*

The participles follow the main verb here, zeroing in on the action like a zoom lens and dilating that action so that the reader feels the tension on the red seams of the ball.

Conventions for Punctuating Participle Phrases

When a participle phrase provides essential information, the phrase is **not** set off with commas:

The students *taking AP and honors classes* were invited to a special banquet.

In this example, the clause *taking AP and honors classes* is essential because it communicates that only the students taking AP and honors classes were invited to the banquet.

When a participle phrase precedes a main clause and/or is non-essential, a comma is needed to separate the two sentence components.

The formula for a sentence that incorporates a participle phrase before a main clause is as follows.

[PARTICIPLE PHRASE] + [,] + [MAIN CLAUSE].

Moving slowly, the turtle found cover underneath the shade of a nearby tree.

In this example, the participle phrase *moving slowly* precedes the main clause and so is set off as a *sentence opener*.

There is no formula for a sentence that includes a participle phrase after a noun. When the participle follows the noun, you need to consider whether the modifier is essential or not essential to identify the noun we are talking about. In the sentence above about the woman playing guitar, *playing guitar* identifies which woman we are referring to: the modifier is essential to the meaning of the noun modified, so there are no commas. However, look at what happens when we move the participle phrase *moving slowly* in the sentence about the turtle.

The turtle, *moving slowly*, found cover underneath the shade of a nearby tree.

The phrase *moving slowly* is not needed to identify the turtle; the modifier is *non-essential*, in that it supplies added, not necessary, information about the subject. It is, therefore, set off from the noun as an *interrupter*.

Common Errors When Using Participle Phrases

When a participle phrase describing an action is present at the beginning of a sentence, the subject of the main clause that follows must be the *doer* of the action that the participle phrase describes:

Having spent the last six hours playing video games, **Ben** turned his Playstation off and went outside.

However, if the agent of the action described by the participle phrase is not in the main clause, a *dangling modifier* occurs:

Having spent the last six hours playing video games, the Playstation was turned off.

Having spent the last six hours playing video games is the participle phrase, but the Playstation is not the doer of the action because it cannot spend time playing games, and it cannot possibly turn itself off. Since the doer of the action is unclear, the above sentence contains a dangling modifier.

Activity 1

Incorporate participle phrases to provide more information and add description to the statements below. Keep in mind that there are many possible answers.

1. The dog _____ at the cat is mine.

2. _____ my homework, I breathed a sigh of relief.
3. _____ the sandwiches in tinfoil, they were ready to serve.
4. Alyssa tripped and fell _____.
5. After _____, I was able to go to the party.

Answer Key for Activity 1

Note that answers will vary.

1. *barking* at the cat
2. *Finishing* my homework
3. *Wrapping* the sandwiches
4. *running* down the hill
5. *completing* my chores

Activity 2

Revise each of the following sentences, looking carefully for dangling modifiers. If no error is present, write “no error.”

1. Tired form a long day at school, the SUV crashed into a tree and rolled three times.
Revision:
2. Climbing the mountain, the sounds of nature filled the area.
Revision:
3. Having arrived late to the airport, John knew his girlfriend would be mad at him.
Revision:
4. Furiously searching for the answers in the textbook, Jessy became confused during the test.
Revision:
5. Wanting to hear new music, the record was taken off the turntable.
Revision:

Answer Key for Activity 2

1. Dangling modifier. Tired from a long day at school, Fatima crashed her SUV, and it rolled three times.
2. Dangling modifier. Climbing the mountain, Jeff and Pat heard the sounds of nature fill the area.
3. No error
4. No error
5. Dangling modifier. Wanting to hear new music, Cassia took the record off the turntable.