



GWU Clinical Research Administration Program Newsletter

Writers Clinic: Dangers—Obstacles to Clarity

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When it comes to dangling modifiers, I have been like Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart. He said of hard-core pornography, "I know it when I see it." Defining pornography, however, is much more difficult than explaining a common grammatical obstacle to getting a writer's point across. So the time has come to define that common problem.

Jane's Approach

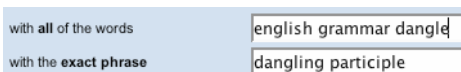
I admit to an aversion to "correcting" papers in English-teacher style. So many people have been traumatized by rigid grammatical instruction that they resist hearing any more of it. I'm more likely to simply point out that a sentence, as written, says something that probably differs from the writer's intention. Then, I make a calculated guess about what the writer means.

For example, this sentence tells us that a book conducted drug trials: "The main focus of the trials being done in the book was on developing medications to be taken orally." What the writer probably actually meant is that "The book points out that the main focus of the drug trials was on developing oral medications."

Careful writers want to be understood, not to make readers shake their heads and think, "Oh, what he probably means is . . ." One good approach to ensuring that your sentences convey your meaning is to read them aloud. Another is to familiarize yourself with the dangers of danglers.

Internet Resources

I knew the dangers, but not the definitions. It was time for me to get busy and Google.



That search found 33 useful definitions.

A copy editing Website, for example, informs us that a dangler is "a phrase, usually at the beginning of a sentence, that is grammatically attached to the subject of the sentence but in fact refers to something other than that subject." www.well.com/~mmcadams/words.html.

An NYU site defines a dangling modifier this way:

"A descriptive clause or phrase that either refers to nothing in the sentence or is in the wrong part of the sentence." www.nyu.edu/classes/copyXediting/Grammar.html.

Cerritos College offers clear examples at: <http://web.cerritos.edu/cm/browse/template.asp?WebsiteID=20040008&DocID=20050600>.

A Valuable Pocket-Size Book

An old faithful resource, now in its fourth edition, is *The Elements of Style* (Strunk & White, 2000). By applying the lessons from this slim little classic, a student can write clearly and concisely.

The authors address danglers in their chapter "Elementary Principles of Composition" (Strunk & White, 2000, p. 28). The advice hasn't changed much in the past 88 years: "The writer must . . . bring together the words, and groups of words, that are related in thought, and keep apart those which are not so related" (Strunk, 1918). Both Strunk's original and the co-authored update follow the instruction with examples that show ways to abolish ambiguity.

The book is not only an all-time favorite among editors, it's a bargain. I gave copies to many of my freelance editing clients, it sat on the desk of every editor who worked for me in publishing, and I forced it on my children by the time they were 11 or 12 years old (the paperback was \$1.85 back in those days). It is in almost every bookstore for \$9.95, and often discounted (my latest amazon.com copy was \$6.85).

Choose Your Weapons

You can find advice on misplaced modifiers in the required texts (American Psychological Association, 2001; Hacker, 2003). You can get good information and examples on the Internet. You can consult Strunk & White or The Writing Center at GWU.

Whatever approach you choose, improving your writing skills can pay off in better grades. Use the method that's most comfortable and convenient for you.

~ Jane Ganter
(references at bottom of last page)

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