

Don't Leave Your Readers Dangling

How to avoid dangling phrases and clauses that don't
really say what you meant

A Brief Tutorial



This document provides a grammar refresher on dangling participles and other dangling phrases to help you avoid mistakes in your prose that can be anything from embarrassing to downright funny. You'll get tips for recognizing danglers and some ideas for how to turn a dangling mess into what you really meant to say in the first place.

Finding and fixing these things on your own will result in a cleaner manuscript when you start working with an editor. And that, in turn, will save you time and money as you work through your final revisions.

Happy writing!



So what makes a dangling clause or phrase?

- Basically, it's a phrase or a clause that doesn't modify what you think it does
- Occurs most often when an introductory phrase in a sentence – which should modify the subject of the sentence – actually modifies or describes some other construct within the sentence
- Dangling participles are the most common
 - Occurs when the modifier in the phrase (often the leading word) is the present or past participle of a verb (ends in “ing” or “ed”)
- Other modifying phrases can dangle and these may be less obvious, but the detection and remediation techniques are similar



Examples

Examples of dangling participles

- Thinking this would be the best Christmas ever, new ornaments for the tree were Sheila's top priority.
- Doomed to spend Christmas alone, decorations were the last thing on Sheila's mind.
- Stopping suddenly to avoid the driver running the stop sign, a pile of papers I'd never seen before slid out from under the passenger seat.
- While trying to recover from the blow, my breath came in short gasps.

Examples of other types of dangling phrases

- Angry at Tom for missing yet another date night because of work, the stop sign almost escaped my notice.
- Ninety-percent sure of the answer, the question I asked was just for confirmation.
- Never one to forget a birthday, the cards Sheila sent were thoughtfully chosen for each recipient.
- Heedless of the danger ahead, the horses were urged to a canter.



Detection – Dangling Participles

- The easiest dangles to detect – just 4 simple steps:
 - 1) Throw away the introductory phrase.
 - 2) Identify the subject, verb, object of the verb (if appropriate), and “extra stuff” in the main part of the sentence.
 - 3) Apply the introductory, modifier phrase to the subject.
 - 4) Ask yourself if that makes sense and if it’s what you really meant to say. If not, you have a dangler that needs fixing.

So let’s try those dangler-detection steps with
our examples of dangling participles



Detection – Dangling Participles

Example One

Thinking this would be the best Christmas ever, new ornaments for the tree were Sheila's top priority.

Step 1: ~~Thinking this would be the best Christmas ever~~, new ornaments for the tree were Sheila's top priority.

Step 2: ~~Thinking this would be the best Christmas ever~~, new ornaments for the tree were Sheila's top priority.

Subject Verb Object of verb
Everything else is “extra stuff” that modifies some of the basic parts of the sentence.

Step 3: Ornaments thinking this would be the best Christmas ever were . . .

Step 4: Does it make sense? Hardly. Pretty sure we don't have thinking ornaments yet.

Is it what you meant to say? Unlikely.

Who is thinking? Sheila.



Detection – Dangling Participles

Example Two

Doomed to spend Christmas alone, decorations were the last thing on Sheila's mind.

Step 1: ~~Doomed to spend Christmas alone~~, decorations were the last thing on Sheila's mind.

Step 2: ~~Doomed to spend Christmas alone~~, decorations were the last thing on Sheila's mind.

Object of verb Subject Verb

Everything else is "extra stuff" that modifies some of the basic parts of the sentence.

Step 3: Decorations doomed to spend Christmas alone were . . .

Step 4: Does it make sense? There might be a strange scenario in which it does, but the overall context of the sentence leads one to the answer "no."

Is it what you meant to say? Unlikely.

Who or what is doomed? Sheila.



Detection – Dangling Participles

Example Four

While trying to recover from the blow, my breath came in short gasps.

Step 1a: ~~While~~ trying to recover from the blow, my breath came in short gasps.

This one may look trickier because it doesn't begin with the participle. But the meaning doesn't change if you drop "While," so discard it first.

Step 1b: ~~While trying to recover from the blow,~~ my breath came in short gasps.

Step 2: ~~While trying to recover from the blow,~~ my **breath** **came** in short gasps.

↑ Subject ↑ Verb

Everything else is "extra stuff" that modifies some of the basic parts of the sentence.

Step 3: Breath trying to recover from the blow came . . .

Step 4: Does it make sense? This one's a little trickier. Yes, the character's breathing is trying to recover, but . . .

Is it what you meant to say? Probably not. Most likely what you meant was that the character's breath came in short gasps while the character was trying to recover from the blow.



Detection – Other Dangling Phrases

- The principles are the same
 - Figure out what the phrase is modifying
 - Decide if – read literally – the sentence says what you meant
- You can use the same 4-step method
 - But context may come into play more often

So let's try with our examples of other types of
dangling phrases



Detection – Other Dangling Phrases

Example One

Angry at Tom for missing yet another date night because of work, the stop sign almost escaped my notice.

Step 1: ~~Angry at Tom for missing yet another date night because of work,~~ the stop sign almost escaped my notice.

Step 2: ~~Angry at Tom for missing yet another date night because of work,~~ the stop sign almost escaped my notice.

Subject Verb Object of verb

Everything else is “extra stuff” that modifies some of the basic parts of the sentence.

Step 3: The stop sign angry at Tom . . . escaped . . .

Step 4: Does it make sense? No

Is it what you meant to say? Not really

Who or what is angry at Tom? Someone who is only implied in the sentence – the first-person narrator.



Detection – Other Dangling Phrases

Example Two

Ninety-percent sure of the answer, the question I asked was just for confirmation.

Step 1: ~~Ninety-percent sure of the answer, the question I asked was just for confirmation.~~

Step 2: ~~Ninety-percent sure of the answer, the question I asked was just for confirmation.~~

↑
Object of verb

↑
Subject

↑
Verb

Everything else is “extra stuff” that modifies some of the basic parts of the sentence.

Step 3: Question . . . sure of the answer . . . was . . .

Step 4: Does it make sense? No. Questions don't have the ability to be sure or unsure of anything.

Is it what you meant to say? Not really

Who or what is “sure of the answer”? The first-person narrator who, this time, is explicitly referenced in the sentence.



Detection – Other Dangling Phrases

Example Three

Never one to forget a birthday, the cards Sheila sent were thoughtfully chosen for each recipient.

Step 1: ~~Never one to forget a birthday,~~ the cards Sheila sent were thoughtfully chosen for each recipient.

Step 2: ~~Never one to forget a birthday,~~ the cards Sheila sent were thoughtfully chosen for each recipient.

↑ Subject ↑ Verb

Everything else is “extra stuff” that modifies some of the basic parts of the sentence.

Step 3:

This one doesn't “reconstruct” very meaningfully, but note that “one” and “cards” don't match and that “cards” aren't capable of “forgetting.”

Step 4: Does it make sense? No

Is it what you meant to say? Unlikely.

Who is it that never forgets a birthday? Sheila



Detection – Other Dangling Phrases

Example Four

Heedless of the danger ahead, the horses were urged to a canter.

Step 1: ~~Heedless of the danger ahead~~, the horses were urged to a canter.

Step 2: ~~Heedless of the danger ahead~~, the **horses** **were urged** to a canter.

↑ ↑
Subject Verb

Everything else is “extra stuff” that modifies some of the basic parts of the sentence.

Step 3: Horses heedless of the danger ahead were urged . . .

Step 4: Does it make sense? Perhaps. It is possible for horses to be heedless of danger and therefore to pick up their pace, but . . .

This example is complicated by the use of passive voice, with the effect that the characters doing the urging are completely absent from the sentence.

Is it what you meant to say? Probably not.

Who is it that’s really heedless of danger? The riders of the horses.



Detection – Advanced

- Most of the previous examples are fairly straightforward sentences. What happens when the sentence is more complex
 - The underlying detection principles are exactly the same
 - It's often the case, however, that the correction requires a little more thought

Go to the next page to see detection principles applied to a complex sentence



Detection – Advanced

Complex sentence example

Determined not to make her Christmas alone any more miserable than it absolutely had to be, decorating, sending holiday cards, and preparing an elaborate meal, all of which Sheila considered as chores even in a good year, were not going to be on the agenda.

Step 1: ~~Determined not to make her Christmas alone any more miserable than it absolutely had to be,~~ decorating, sending holiday cards, and preparing an elaborate meal, all of which Sheila considered as chores even in a good year, were not going to be on the agenda.

Step 2: ~~Determined not to make her Christmas alone any more miserable than it absolutely had to be,~~ decorating, sending holiday cards, and preparing an elaborate meal, all of which Sheila considered as chores even in a good year, **were** not going to be on the agenda.

↑
Verb

↑
Compound Subject

Everything else is “extra stuff” that modifies some of the basic parts of the sentence.

Step 3: Decorating, sending, . . . and preparing – determined not to . . . – were not going to be . . .

You can ignore the additional complexity of the introductory phrase

Step 4: Does it make sense? Not at all. It isn't the tasks that are determined. Is it what you meant to say? Unlikely. Who or what is determined? Sheila.



Remediation

- #1 guiding principle is to make sure that any introductory phrase or clause that is a modifier refers to the subject of the sentence
- There is no single correct way to remediate a dangling phrase
- Options include
 - Reorganizing the sentence so that the subject of the sentence is the who or what referenced by the phrase
 - Repositioning the modifying phrase so that it's in the right place relative to what it modifies
 - Restructuring the sentence entirely to more effectively express what you want to say
 - Sometimes, making more than one sentence is a good answer
- Consider all the options available and choose the one that creates the best flow for your narrative and that doesn't create further awkwardness or confusion for readers
- I've suggested 3 possible remediations for each of our dangler examples. Can you think of others?



Remediation Possibilities for our Dangler Examples

- Thinking this would be the best Christmas ever, new ornaments for the tree were Sheila's top priority.
 - *Sheila was thinking this would be the best Christmas ever, so new ornaments for the tree were her top priority.*
 - *Thinking this would be the best Christmas ever, Sheila made new ornaments for the tree her top priority.*
 - *New ornaments for the tree were Sheila's top priority for making this the best Christmas ever.*

- Doomed to spend Christmas alone, decorations were the last thing on Sheila's mind.
 - *Decorations were the last thing on Sheila's mind now that she was doomed to spend Christmas alone.*
 - *Doomed to spend Christmas alone, Sheila saw no point in putting up any decorations.*
 - *If she was doomed to spend Christmas alone, Sheila wasn't going to compound her depression by putting up decorations that no one else would get to enjoy.*



Remediation Possibilities for our Dangler Examples

- Stopping suddenly to avoid the driver running the stop sign, a pile of papers I'd never seen before slid out from under the passenger seat.
 - *Stopping suddenly to avoid the driver running the stop sign, I was surprised when a pile of papers I'd never seen before slid out from under the passenger seat.*
 - *When I slammed on the brakes to avoid the driver running the stop sign, a pile of papers I'd never seen before slid out from under the passenger seat.*
 - *If a driver running a stop sign hadn't forced me to come to a sudden stop, I might never have known about the pile of papers that slid out of their hiding place under the passenger seat.*

- While trying to recover from the blow, my breath came in short gasps.
 - *While I was trying to recover from the blow, my breath came in short gasps.*
 - *While trying to recover from the blow, I could only breathe in short gasps.*
 - *I stood there, trying to recover from the blow, only able to manage short gasps of breath.*



Remediation Possibilities for our Dangler Examples

- Angry at Tom for missing yet another date night because of work, the stop sign almost escaped my notice.
 - *Angry at Tom for missing yet another date night because of work, I almost missed seeing the stop sign at Main and Liskey.*
 - *If I hadn't been so angry at Tom, I might have noticed the stop sign sooner. How could he miss another date night because of work?*
 - *The stop sign at Main and Liskey almost escaped my notice, consumed as I was with anger at Tom for missing yet another date night because of work.*

- Ninety-percent sure of the answer, the question I asked was just for confirmation.
 - *Ninety-percent sure of the answer, I asked the question anyway, just for confirmation.*
 - *The question was just to get confirmation, since I was already ninety-percent sure of the answer.*
 - *The question was for confirmation. I was ninety-percent sure I already knew the answer.*



Remediation Possibilities for our Dangler Examples

- **Never one to forget a birthday, the cards Sheila sent were thoughtfully chosen for each recipient.**
 - *Never one to forget a birthday, Sheila chose each card explicitly for the person who'd receive it.*
 - *Sheila never forgot anyone's birthday, and each card she sent reflected how thoughtfully she'd matched it to the recipient.*
 - *Never one to forget a birthday, Sheila was a regular at the card shop, carefully choosing each card with a specific recipient in mind.*

- **Heedless of the danger ahead, the horses were urged to a canter.**
 - *Heedless of the danger ahead, the riders urged their horses to a canter.*
 - *The riders urged their horses to a canter, heedless of the danger ahead.*
 - *The horses were feeling frisky and responded immediately when we urged them to a canter. We had no idea of the danger that lay ahead.*



Remediation Possibilities for our Dangler Examples

- Determined not to make her Christmas alone any more miserable than it absolutely had to be, decorating, sending holiday cards, and preparing an elaborate meal, all of which Sheila considered as chores even in a good year, were not going to be on the agenda.
 - *Determined not to make her Christmas alone any more miserable than it absolutely had to be, Sheila decided that decorating, sending holiday cards, and preparing an elaborate meal – things she considered chores even in a good year – would not be on the agenda.*
 - *Sheila considered decorating, sending holiday cards, and preparing an elaborate meal to be chores even in a good year, so she was not about to make her Christmas alone any more miserable by putting them on the agenda.*
 - *Decorating, sending holiday cards, and preparing an elaborate meal would not be on the agenda. Sheila was determined not to make her Christmas alone any more miserable by doing things that felt like chores even in the years when others were there to enjoy them.*