

Don't Ring An Agent's Alarm Bells

How to avoid one of the things that put agents and
acquisition editors on edge

A Brief Tutorial



This document provides some insights into one of the pet peeves of agents and acquisition editors – overuse of present participle – verb forms that end in “ing.” It’s one of those things that can get you a rapid rejection letter because it’s a sign of immature writing and lack of variety in sentence structure.

It’s largely a matter of awareness. We can easily train ourselves to notice such things as we work on our own revisions, which in turn, leads to generally better craftsmanship even in the first draft. It’s another thing you can take care of on your own so that you have 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!



With Apologies to Hal David and Burt Bacharach

I doubt the songwriters set out to teach a writing lesson – they were just thinking about meter and rhythm

But take a look at the lyrics below (you'll have to supply the “g” in place of the apostrophe for “wishing,” etc.)

*'Cause wishin' and hopin' and thinkin' and prayin'
Plannin' and dreamin' his kisses will start
That won't get you into his heart
So if you're thinkin' of how great true love is
All you gotta do is hold him and kiss him and squeeze him and love him
Yeah, just do it
And after you do, you will be his*

Wishin' And Hopin' lyrics © Warner Chappell Music, Inc, BMG Rights Management, Royalty Network

The message for writers:

All those present participle verbs – the ones that end with “ing” – won't win an agent's love

But the present indicative ones – no “ing” in sight – will do the trick

Of course, I'm **not** recommending that you take the song's advice with your prospective agent





A Little Grammar Refresher

- **Verb forms, tenses, and moods**
 - Infinitive form – the “base” verb: to like, to help, to see, to illustrate
 - Participle form
 - Present: add “ing” as in liking, helping, seeing, illustrating
 - Past: usually adds “ed” as in liked, helped, illustrated, but may be irregular as in seen
 - Mood
 - Indicative: I like, you like, he/she/it likes . . .
 - Progressive: I am liking, you are liking, he/she/it is liking . . .

- **“Personas” of the present participle form**
 - Progressive mood
 - Gerunds
 - Present participles that function as nouns, as in “Walking is great exercise.”
 - “Walking” is the present participle of “to walk,” but in this sentence it acts like a noun – as if you had said “A walk is great exercise.”
 - Adjectives
 - As in “parking place,” “building blocks,” or “rolling pin”

- **Common usages of present participles**
 - Narrative and dialogue
 - Individual modifiers (see “Adjectives”)
 - Modifier phrases
 - Introductory phrases to a sentence
 - Explanatory phrases
 - Dialogue tags



And yes, other things make it tricky

- There are other words that end in “ing” and have nothing to do with present participles
 - During
 - Thing
 - Notwithstanding
 - King
 - String

- There are verbs that the infinitive ends in “ing,” so the present participle just doubles things up
 - Ring ringing
 - Cling clinging
 - Sing singing

- And don’t confuse “action verbs” with the progressive mood
 - The horse galloped along.
 - “Gallop” is an action verb
 - The horse was galloping along.
 - Progressive mood



So what's wrong with “ing” words and why are they a red flag for agents?

- **The simple answer**
 - There's nothing wrong with them, and they can be very useful and effective.
- **The more complete answer**
 - The problem comes with overuse and its corollary, unnecessary or inappropriate use.
- **Consider the following example**

Even though it was getting late, the band was playing and the guests were dancing. Turning to Fred, who was sitting beside her at the table, Charlotte said, “I’m wondering when they’ll be cutting the cake.”

“I’m thinking it’s about time,” he replied, putting his arm around her and giving her a little squeeze.

“These shoes are killing me!” exclaimed Jennifer, flopping into a chair and removing one of her red stilettos.

Rolling his eyes, Fred said, “Wearing those things would make anyone’s feet hurt.”

- 16 occurrences of an “ing” word in 85 words of text – 19% of the text. All readers can see is “ing,” over and over again.
- It’s dull, unimaginative, repetitive, and likely to turn readers off
 - not to put too fine a point on it ☺
- **So what’s a writer to do?**



Culling your present participles

- Here's a step-by-step approach. As you become more aware of your own tendencies, you'll quickly begin to recognize how to add variety to your sentence structures and use present participles when they're most effective.
- Step 1: Use indicative mood whenever and wherever possible

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BETTER

Even though it was late, the band played and the guests continued to dance. Turning to Fred, seated beside her at the table, Charlotte said, "I wonder when they'll cut the cake."

"I think it's about time," he replied, as he put his arm around her and gave her a little squeeze.

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Culling your present participles

- **Step 2: Look for ways to remove clumsiness by changing words or phrases**

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BETTER STILL

Even though it was late, the guests seemed willing to dance as long as the band would play. Charlotte said, "I wonder when they'll cut the cake."

"It's about time, I think," Fred replied, as he put his arm around her and gave her a little squeeze.

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Culling your present participles

▪ Step 3: Add some real variety to your sentence structure

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AGENT-READY

Despite the hour, the guests seemed willing to dance as long as the band would play. Charlotte glanced at her watch. "Gee, it's late. I wonder when they'll cut the cake."

"About time, isn't it?" Fred replied. He put his arm around his wife and gave her a little squeeze.

"These shoes are killing me!" exclaimed Jennifer, as she hobbled off the dance floor with her red stilettos in one hand and a glass of champagne in the other.

Fred couldn't help rolling his eyes. "I've never understood why women wear those things."



So now you've got the idea

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- Even though we've increased the word count (now 93 words), this version has
 - More interesting narration
 - Better variety of sentence and phrase structures
 - More natural dialogue
 - More visual impact
 - Only 3 present participles – but they're all important and they're all highly effective

- As you think about your participles, don't forget you shouldn't leave any of them dangling
 - Check out the tutorial entitled "Don't Leave Your Readers Dangling" to learn how to avoid and/or remediate that problem