

SANIBEL SHELL SHOCKED

Finding the Cure for the Dangling Participle

By Art Stevens

Young and inexperienced, the task seemed easy to me.

Wrong.

It should be: young and inexperienced, I thought the task easy. The first sentence is a glaring example of the unpardonable in English grammar – the dangling participle. As Strunk and White say in their bible for writers “The Elements of Style” a participial phrase at the beginning of a sentence must refer to the grammatical subject.

In many states in the U.S., the use of premeditated dangling participles in speech or writing is still considered a misdemeanor punishable by sixty days in a kindergarten class. In other states unless you know how to undangle a participle you can lose your plumbing license as well as your right to use the subjunctive tense in mixed company.

But chronic practitioners of the dangling participle can now find solace. A drug that jars the cerebral nerves into connecting dangling participles with the appropriate nouns is now in clinical trials. And following right behind these rigorous clinical trials is one to cure the widespread disease of ending sentences with prepositions. This is one disease society simply can't deal with. Oops, where's that new drug when I need it the most?

A participle is generally a word that ends with “ing”, like winning, playing, colliding and gesticulating. These words are often separated from their noun subjects by many words, thus making it easy to connect the participle with the wrong noun.

Dangling participles have led to disastrous wars in ancient history such as the infamous “Participial Nouns” War of 1066. Now mind you, the printing press hadn't been invented as yet so word of mouth was the prevalent means of communication. It was just such a word of mouth misunderstanding that led to the King of France slapping the King of England in the face accusing him of participial transgressions. Had both kings properly understood the rules of dangling participles the bloody war could have been averted. But pride won out and a ten-year war ensued.

England won the war and all Frenchmen found guilty of dangling participles in France were dangled with ropes around their necks. The French were a proud people and guerilla warfare broke out to oppose the ban on dangling participles. Participles were dangled so openly that the King of England withdrew his troops and uttered the historic pronouncement: “Let the French dangle their participles until the cows come home.”

Centuries passed and when the new land was settled, the dangling participle entered the American lexicon. During our formative years, there were far worse

transgressions than the dangling participle and although strict grammarians bristled the dangling participle was never fully eradicated.

It wasn't until Richard Nixon became president that Congress passed the infamous "Alien and Sedition Dangling Participle Act" which outlawed the use of dangling participles in the United States. Some called it our country's second prohibition. Dangling participles were no longer allowed in movies, television and books.

But with the advent of the internet, dangling participles could no longer be stopped. And the Supreme Court mercifully ended the law that outlawed dangling participles. The law could never be enforced anyway as college students strutted their participles from state to state to protest their right to free speech.

So what we're left with today is the "gotcha" moment when strict grammarians, loyal to the dictates of the eleventh century King of England, still call out those in violation of the dangling participle and place their photos on post office walls. If there's one lesson to be learned it's on arriving in Chicago, his friends met him at the station. Ha. I snuck one in – a glaring, illegal, unsanctioned and mind blowing dangling participle.