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What's a Dangling Participle?

A participle is simply a verb form that ends in *ing* or *ed*. It's often used as the first word of a modifying phrase (fluff) in a sentence. When a participle is out of place, the sentence can be off balance, because it appears to modify something it doesn't:

Sitting on my mother's lap, the circus was more enjoyable. [The circus was sitting on my mother's lap?]

Growing up in California, San Diego is the only place I'd want to live. [San Diego didn't grow up in California.]

Having nothing else to fill the time, the entire chocolate cake was eaten. [The cake had nothing else to fill its time?]

Consider the sentence: *On arriving at the airport, my friends met me at the gate.* Who arrived at the airport? The way the sentence reads now, it was my friends who arrived, because the participle phrase is next to that noun. How can you modify *I* if *I* doesn't even appear in the sentence?

This problem can easily be solved by remembering the skeleton rule:

- (1) Head [who/what]
- (2) Body [did/does/do what]
- (3) Bottom [to whom/what]
- (4) Fluffy feet [when, where, why, how]

Even if you put some fluff up front, make sure your head comes before your feet:

[why] *Having nothing else to fill the time,*

[who] *I* [did what] *ate* [to whom] *the entire chocolate cake.*

The opening phrase is fluff, which is not normally good structure at the beginning of a sentence, but it works in this case.

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[when] *On arriving at the airport*
[who] *I [did what] met [to whom] my friends*
[where] *at the gate.*

Of course your best structure is:

[who] *I [did what] met [to whom] my friends*
[where] *at the airport [when] when they arrived.*

Participles aren't the only modifiers that dangle. Adjectives and adverbs can dangle too. Single modifiers should be next to, and preferably in front of, what they modify. Modifying phrases also follow the skeleton rule. Let's look at some examples and possible solutions:

I almost worked overtime two hours. [Did you almost work?]

Better: *I worked almost two hours overtime.*

A mind is a terrible thing to waste. [A mind is a terrible thing?]

Better: *It's a terrible thing to waste a mind.*

The woman borrowed an egg from a neighbor that was rotten. [Was the neighbor rotten?]

Better: *The woman borrowed an egg that was rotten from a neighbor.*

Better yet: *The woman borrowed an egg, which turned out to be rotten, from a neighbor.*

Due to possible injury, picnic tables are not be moved by swings.

You don't really need me to rewrite that one, do you?