

Grammar Guru 9

V Saraswathi

As a grammar teacher, I often come across sentences like the following in my students' compositions:

Coming up the hall, the clock struck ten.

(When did clocks start walking?)

Flying over the oak tree, the farmer saw the flock of birds that had damaged his crops.

(Since when have farmers started flying?)

This is a very common mistake most of us commit and we are not generally aware of it. Let's look at the correct forms first, and then see why the sentences are wrong.

As I was coming up the hall, the clock struck ten.

The farmer saw the flock of birds flying over the tree. They had damaged his crops.

The phrases in bold above are known as **dangling modifiers**. A **modifier** is a phrase that gives more information about the subject, verb or object in a sentence. The modifier is said to 'dangle' when it relates to the wrong word in the sentence. A **dangling modifier** occurs when a writer starts a construction but forgets where he is going. As a result, there is confusion about the meaning as well as obscurity.

Here are some ludicrous examples:

Coming around the bend in the road, the church was seen.

(Can the church come on the road?)

Running down the street, the house was on fire.

(Can houses run down streets?)

Here are some steps to set right a dangling modifier:

1. Check for modifying phrases at the beginning of sentences.
2. Underline the first noun that follows the modifier.
3. Check if the noun and its modifier are logically related. If not, you have a dangling modifier there.
4. Rewrite the sentence using the appropriate

subject of the modifier.

For example, **coming around the bend** is a modifier, but it is not logically related to the noun **the church**, which follows it. The logical subject of **coming** must be a noun or a pronoun, for example, **I**.

As I was coming around the bend in the road, I saw the church.

Similarly, *As I was running down the street, I saw the house on fire.*

Michael Swan calls these **misrelated participles** and says that such sentences are common and often seem quite natural when the main clause has a preparatory **It** or **There** as the subject.

Being French, it is surprising that she is a terrible cook.

Having so little time, there wasn't much that I could do.

Would you like to 'undangle' the modifiers in the sentences given below? Try.

- a) *Locked in the vault for fifty years, the owner of the coins decided to sell them.*
- b) *Sailing up the river, the statue of Liberty was seen.*
- c) *When still a girl, my father joined the army.*

Answers:

- a) *The owner decided to sell the coins locked in the vault for fifty years.*
- b) *While we were sailing up the river, the statue of Liberty was seen.*
- c) *My father joined the army when I was still a girl.*

Dr V. Saraswathi, (Formerly) Professor of English (ELT), University of Madras.

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