

Dangling Modifiers

“Running to the bus, the backpack fell in the mud.” Why is this sentence strange? This sentence states that the backpack (subject) was running to the bus, rather than the person (implied actor or agent) carrying the backpack. The implied actor is not mentioned in the sentence at all. This type of error is called a **dangling modifier**, and it presents a problem in your writing since it makes your intended meaning unclear. Dangling modifiers usually occur at the beginning of a sentence, though they can also be found at the end of a sentence.

Strategies to Fix Dangling Modifiers

There are two strategies to fix a dangling modifier. The first is to name the actor or agent as the subject of the sentence.

Example: Walking toward the forest, the sun began to set.
(In this example, “walking toward the forest” is a dangling modifier since it sounds as if the sun is walking toward the forest.)

Revision: Walking toward the forest, I watched as the sun began to set.
(The actor, I, is named as the subject of the sentence.)

The second strategy to fix a dangling modifier is to name the actor or agent in the modifier itself.

Example: Walking toward the forest, the sun began to set.

Revision: As I walked toward the forest, the sun began to set.
(The actor, I, is added to the modifier.)

Activity

Underline the dangling modifier in each sentence. Choose a strategy and revise the sentence. Note which strategy you used in your revision.

1. Having completed her finals, a summer road trip was planned.
2. After writing the paper, the thesis remains unsupported.
3. Given praise by his teachers, his attitude became obnoxious.
4. Not having followed the recipe closely, the cake was a disaster.
5. Having finished dinner, the plate was emptied.
6. While sleeping, the house caught on fire.

Answer Key for Activity

1. Having completed her finals, she planned a summer road trip. (Strategy #1)
2. After he wrote the paper, the thesis remained unsupported. (Strategy #2)
3. After being praised by his teachers, he developed an obnoxious attitude. (Strategy #1)
4. Since she did not follow the recipe closely, the cake was a disaster. (Strategy #2)
5. Having finished dinner, she emptied the plate. (Strategy #1)
6. While he was sleeping, the house caught on fire. (Strategy #2)

References

- “Dangling Modifiers.” *Purdue University Online Writing Lab*. 6 February 2008. Web.
- Maimon, Elaine P., Janice H. Peritz, and Kathleen Blake Yancey. *A Writer’s Resource: A Handbook for Writing and Research*. Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2007. Print.