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# The Participle Phrase

Recognize a *participle phrase* when you see one.

A participle phrase will begin with a present or past participle. If the participle is present, it will dependably end in *ing*. Likewise, a regular past participle will end in a consistent *ed*. Irregular past participles, unfortunately, conclude in all kinds of ways [although this list will help].

Since all phrases require two or more words, a participle phrase will often include objects and/or modifiers that complete the thought. Here are some examples:

Crunching caramel corn for the  
entire movie

Washed with soap and water

Stuck in the back of the closet  
behind the obsolete computer

Participle phrases always function as **adjectives**, adding description to the sentence. Read these examples:

The horse *trotting up to the fence* hopes that you have an apple or carrot.

*Trotting up to the fence* modifies the **noun** *horse*.

The water drained slowly in the pipe *clogged with dog hair*.

*Clogged with dog hair* modifies the noun *pipe*.

*Eaten by mosquitoes*, we wished that we had made hotel, not campsite, reservations.

*Eaten by mosquitoes* modifies the **pronoun** *we*.

## Don't mistake a present participle phrase for a gerund phrase.

**Gerund** and present participle phrases are easy to confuse because they both begin with an *ing* word. The difference is the function that they provide in the sentence. A gerund phrase will always behave as a noun while a present participle phrase will act as an adjective. Check out these examples:

*Walking on the beach*, Delores

dodged jellyfish that had washed ashore.

***Walking on the beach*** = present participle phrase describing the noun ***Delores***.

***Walking on the beach*** is painful if jellyfish have washed ashore.

***Walking on the beach*** = gerund phrase, the **subject** of the **verb is**.

***Waking to the buzz of the alarm clock***, Freddie cursed the arrival of another Monday.

***Waking to the buzz of the alarm clock*** = present participle phrase describing the noun ***Freddie***.

Freddie hates ***waking to the buzz of the alarm clock***.

***Waking to the buzz of the alarm clock*** = gerund phrase, the **direct object** of the verb ***hates***.

After a long day at school and work, LaShae found her roommate Ben ***eating the last of the leftover pizza***.

***Eating the last of the leftover pizza*** = present participle phrase describing the noun ***Ben***.

Ben's rudest habit is ***eating the last of the leftover pizza***.

***Eating the last of the leftover***

***pizza*** = gerund phrase, the **subject complement** of the linking verb ***is***.

## Punctuate a participle phrase correctly.

When a participle phrase introduces a **main clause**, separate the two sentence components with a comma. The pattern looks like this:

**PARTICIPLE PHRASE** + , + **MAIN CLAUSE** .

Read this example:

***Glazed with barbecue sauce,***  
the rack of ribs lay nestled next  
to a pile of sweet coleslaw.

When a participle phrase concludes a main clause and is describing the word right in front of it, you need no punctuation to connect the two sentence parts. The pattern looks like this:

**MAIN CLAUSE** + Ø + **PARTICIPLE PHRASE** .

Check out this example:

Mariah risked petting the pit  
bull ***wagging its stub tail***.

But when a participle phrase concludes a main clause and modifies a word farther up

in the sentence, you will need a comma. The pattern looks like this:

MAIN CLAUSE + , + PARTICIPLE

PHRASE .

Check out this example:

Cooper enjoyed dinner at Audrey's house, *agreeing to a large slice of cherry pie even though he was full to the point of bursting*.

## Don't misplace or dangle your participle phrases.

Participle phrases are the most common modifier to **misplace** or **dangle**. In clear, logical sentences, you will find modifiers right next to the words they describe.

*Shouting with happiness,*  
*William* celebrated his chance to interview at SunTrust.

Notice that the participle phrase sits right in front of William, the one doing the shouting.

If too much distance separates a modifier and its target, the modifier is misplaced.

*Draped neatly on a hanger,*  
William borrowed Grandpa's old *suit* to wear to the interview.

The suit, not William, is on the hanger! The modifier must come closer to the word it is

meant to describe:

For the interview, William borrowed Grandpa's old *suit, which was draped neatly on a hanger.*

If the sentence fails to include a target, the modifier is dangling.

Straightening his tie and smoothing his hair, the appointment time for the interview had finally arrived.

We assume William is about to interview, but where is he in the sentence? We need a target for the participle phrase *straightening his tie and smoothing his hair.*

Straightening his tie and smoothing his hair, *William* was relieved that the appointment time for the interview had finally arrived.



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