

I have been accused of using a 'dangling participle'.

What is my tutor talking about?

Dangling participles, also known as dangling modifiers, aren't in the least painful.

Consider the following sentences:

1. Looking at the sky, it was clear that rain was on the way.
2. Crossing the road, John saw the bus driving off.
3. Climbing the mountain, the weather was becoming really threatening.
4. Talking to my students, they tell me they have trouble with listening to native speakers.

Only sentence 2 is technically correct grammar.

Why? Well, ask yourself who is doing the looking, the crossing, the climbing and the talking?

In formal grammar, the subject of the participle must be the same as the subject of the main clause which follows it.

In sentence 2, John is the subject of the participle (crossing) and of the main clause verb (saw) but, in the other sentences, it's not clear who is doing what.

In sentence 1, 'it' is not what was doing the crossing, someone else was so it would be better phrased as "Looking at the sky, I saw that rain was on the way."

In sentence 3, it's silly to assume that the weather was climbing the mountain but that is what is implied so it would be better as "Climbing the mountain, we noticed the weather was becoming really threatening."

Sentence 4 is hard to follow because the reader has to re-arrange the sentence to see that it is the writer who was doing the talking and the students who were doing the telling so it would be better as "Talking to my students I understand from them that they have trouble with listening to native speakers." It would probably be even better and simpler as "My students tell me ..."

It's very easy to fall into the trap of using dangling particles because in informal language, they are easily overlooked – the reader simply assigns the logical subject to each verb. Few would object to something like "Arriving at the airport it was easy to see that the flight would be late." or "Reading your email it was lovely to hear the good news."

There are three snags:

- In all formal writing, you need to avoid these things and make sure that the subjects match – this is particularly important for academic writing.
- In some cases, the sentence becomes laughable and that's not the message you want to send.
- In other cases, as in sentence 5 below, the meaning is ambiguous – who or what is doing the falling?

Here are some more examples of dangling modifiers for you to correct:

5. Falling into the river, John's hat got lost.
6. Migrating south, I saw huge flocks of starlings.
7. Using drugs like she does we can see she'll soon be in trouble.

So the rule simply is: make sure the subject of the participle and the subject of the main clause which follows are the same or you will confuse or amuse.