

Dangling participles

Adjectives and verbs ending in -ing are called present participles. They must be used carefully.

Consider the following sentences:

Standing at the gate, a scorpion stung the man.

This sentence seems to suggest that it was the scorpion which stood at the gate. Actually, it was the man. He was stung by the scorpion when he was standing at the gate.

Now another example is given below.

Flitting from flower to flower, the girl watched the bee.

The girl didn't flit from flower to flower. The bee did.

The problem with these sentences is the incorrect use of the participle.

A participle is a kind of verb form used to modify nouns. It serves the same purpose as adjectives. Participles are also used to make continuous and perfect tense forms but that is not what we are discussing here. When a participle is used as an adjective, the readers should be able to find out which noun the participle refers to. This noun is called the antecedent of the participle. If the antecedent isn't clear, the action will be attributed to the wrong person.

These participles that are left dangling without a clear antecedent are called dangling participles.

The example sentences given above need to be rewritten as:

A scorpion stung the man standing at the gate. (OR A scorpion stung the man who was standing at the gate.)

The girl watched the bee flitting from flower to flower.