

A Word, Please: Fascinated with dangles

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Here's something you don't hear every day: I'm fascinated with dangles.

It's true. When a phrase attaches to a sentence wrong, causing the writer to say something they never intended, it intrigues me.

For instance, here's a sentence that stopped me dead in my tracks while editing recently: "By purging these bacteria from your gut, online health gurus and supplement marketers claim that probiotics can improve your overall health."

It sounds fine and the meaning is clear. So this sentence is OK. But editors don't settle for OK. We aim for precise, unambiguous sentences in which the words say exactly what the writer meant. By editor standards, this sentence didn't cut it.

Don't see anything wrong? Ask yourself who, exactly, is doing the purging? As written, this sentence says that health gurus and marketers are doing the purging: "By purging ... health marketers say." That's not what the writer meant.

Readers naturally expect that the first noun after a modifying phrase is the person or thing the phrase applies to. But when the wrong noun is in that position, the phrase doesn't attach properly. Instead, it dangles.

A simplified example: "By purging voters, the registrar was breaking the law." See how the subject of the main clause, "the registrar," is clearly the one who was doing the purging? But shuffle that around and the intended meaning gets lost: "By purging voters, the election was skewed by the registrar." Technically, we're saying that the election purged the voters because "the election" comes right after the modifying phrase.

So here, the phrase “by purging” is a dangler because it doesn’t connect properly to the thing it applies to: the registrar.

The dangler in our original sentence is easy to fix. After “claim,” just delete the word “that” and insert a comma: “By purging these bacteria from your gut, online health gurus and supplement marketers claim, probiotics can improve your overall health.”

Our new comma works with the first one to set off the whole bit about gurus and marketers as parenthetical information.

Ensconced in commas, this clause signals that this is an aside — not the subject of “by purging.” That will come later in the next bit which begins with “probiotics” — the correct subject of “by purging.”

Here’s another dangler that caught my eye recently: One day while working on the farm with her father, they came across a wasps’ nest.

This one makes my head hurt. It was in a story profiling an entrepreneur, so it was clear at this point in the story who “her” referred to. But who do we mean by “they”? Obviously, it would mean both the entrepreneur and her father were it not for one little problem: the first part of the sentence dangles. Why? Because it’s about one person — the person who was working with her father. “They” suggests they were both working with her father, even though one of them was her father. Hence my headache.

To fix this, change the structure of the opening phrase: “One day while she and her dad were working on the farm.” By making this a complete clause, containing both a subject and a verb, you no longer have the modifying participle “working” looking for a subject to attach to. You already gave “working” its subject. So when the word “they” comes up, it’s a logical reference to both the woman and her father.

Another alternative that eliminates the dangler: One day while she was working on the farm with her father, the pair came across a wasps’ nest.

Danglers like these aren’t a huge problem because the reader easily gets the meaning. But if you want to write with precision, make sure that the first noun after a modifying phrase is the person or thing the phrase applies to.

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