The Gerund-Participle

A **gerund** is a form of verb that functions as a noun. The words “reading,” “swimming” and “writing,” for example, come from verbs, but you may sometimes use them as nouns, as in “I like reading.”

A **participle** is a form of verb which functions more like an adjective or adverb, or which (combined with a finite verb) describes ongoing action. For example “He was *trembling* like a leaf” (verbal use) or “She tried to calm the *trembling* puppy” (adjectival use).

Both gerunds and participles are formed by the root of a verb plus the suffix “-ing;” because of the identical form, all “-ing” words are sometimes referred to as **gerund-participles**. For a detailed description of the subtle differences between gerunds and participles, see Grammar Girl’s article on the subject at: [http://www.quickanddirtytips.com/education/grammar/participles-and-gerunds](http://www.quickanddirtytips.com/education/grammar/participles-and-gerunds).

Using the **gerund-participle** form can be effective, but when applied improperly it often complicates and confuses academic writing. The worst offender is the **dangling modifier**:

A **dangling modifier** occurs when a participial phrase accidentally modifies the wrong subject and obscures the meaning of the sentence. In such a case, the writer has used a verbal participle where they should have used a finite verb together with a clearly indicated subject. For example:

- **Reading the book, the princess slew the dragon.**
  
  [participial phrase] [wrong subject]

In this example, it sounds as if the princess slew the dragon while she was reading a book. This is probably not what the writer wants to express. To correct the phrase, add the subject of the participial phrase (in this case, the reader) and restructure the sentence as needed:

- **Reading the book, Harold learned that the princess slew the dragon.**
  
  [correct subject]

Take a minute to learn the difference between gerunds and participles and their appropriate uses. It will improve your writing. It is also good practice to avoid participial phrases wherever possible. There is often a better and more direct way to express yourself. In the example above, the participial phrase “reading the book” lets you get away with not specifying the subject; it leaves your reader in the dark as to who is reading the book and how the first part of the sentence relates to the second. When you proofread your work, circle each “-ing” word and determine whether it is the best form for that situation. If the word is functioning like a verb (participle), and the subject is unclear, add in the subject and then complete or replace the participle with a finite verb. Ex: “He **read(s)** the book,” “She **was/is** reading the book.”