

Word for Word

Dangling Modifiers

You probably know that a verb should have a subject. After all, an action needs an actor. What you may not know is that other sentence parts also need a clear subject. One such sentence part is called a participial phrase, which contains a verb form called a participle. (Participles have characteristics of both verbs and adjectives and usually end in –ing or –(e)d.) Here are some examples of participial phrases, with the participles underlined:

While growing up...
After washing the cells
with phosphate-buffered
saline...
Treated with the optimal
combination...
By normalizing the
various metrics...



When the intended subject of a participial phrase is absent or misplaced, the participial phrase is called a dangling modifier because what it modifies is not clear. Here are some examples of dangling modifiers (with underlined participles):

While growing up, my hometown didn't feel small. (This sentence suggests that the hometown was growing up.)
After washing the cells with phosphate-buffered saline, an immunohistochemical stain was applied. (This sentence suggests that the stain did the washing.)
Treated with the optimal combination, we can expect the tumor to shrink. (This sentence suggests that "we" are undergoing the treatment.)
By normalizing the various metrics, the surveys could be visualized

together. (This sentence suggests that the surveys did the normalizing.)

One way to clarify these sentences is to place the subject right next to the participial phrase. Here, the above sentences have been clarified (with subjects underlined):

While I was growing up, I didn't feel that my hometown was small.

After washing the cells with phosphate-buffered saline, we applied an immunohistochemical stain.

Treated with the optimal combination, the tumor can be expected to shrink.

By normalizing the various metrics, we could visualize the surveys together.

Another solution is to put the participial phrase into its own clause (i.e., with a subject and verb):

While I was growing up, my hometown didn't feel small.

After we washed the cells with phosphate-buffered saline, an immunohistochemical stain was applied.

When the tumor is treated with the optimal combination, we can expect the tumor to shrink.

When we normalized the various metrics, the surveys could be visualized together.

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