

# The Present Participle in Phrases

The present participle presents no problems except in its use in a participial phrase at the end of a sentence. Such a construction is not wrong, but writers often use it in an illogical way. The error is largely attributable to the influence of television and radio news, where the error occurs with regularity in news blurbs. The form is always: *Subject + Verb + Present-Participial Phrase*.

## CORRECT SENTENCES

*Correct*

Carrying a green toolbox, Jerry walked down the stairs.

*Correct*

Jerry, carrying a green toolbox, walked down the stairs.

*Correct*

Jerry walked down the stairs, carrying a green toolbox.

## Function as an Adjective

In the example sentences, the phrase <carrying a green toolbox> describes an action, but it is not a verb. It functions as an adjective that tells us something about Jerry.

Anyone who knows only the rudiments of grammar may think that an adjective is always a word like <green>, which is an adjective that describes <toolbox>. But participles also function as adjectives, despite their verblike nature. The phrase <carrying a green toolbox> describes Jerry. Even though the phrase denotes an action, the phrase tells us something specific about the appearance or nature of Jerry. It tells us that we are concerned with a *particular* Jerry — the Jerry *carrying a toolbox*, not with a Jerry *eating a meal* or a Jerry *brushing his teeth*.

And that particular Jerry does something — something that the verb in the sentence describes. The verb is <walked>.

## ***Simultaneous Action***

In these examples above, the participle denotes an action that is simultaneous with the action of the verb <walked> in the sentence. This is important, because proper use of a present-participial phrase requires the phrase to show action that is simultaneous with or immediately prior to the action of the verb in the sentence. Notice that we moved the phrase around in the sentence with no change in the meaning. This is possible because the phrase denotes action that is current with the verb <walked> in the sentence. The carrying and the walking happen at the same time.

**Prior Action**

Another correct use of the participle is to have it present an action that takes place right *before* the verb and *flows* into the action of the verb of the sentence. In the following examples the phrase <lifting his rifle> is actually an action *before* the verb, but it works, because it describes the frontier scout just as he engages in the action that the verb <aims> conveys.

*Correct*

Lifting his rifle, the frontier scout takes aim.

*Correct*

The frontier scout, lifting his rifle, takes aim.

But note that the following, with the phrase at the end, does not work. The separate first action (lifting his rifle) cannot be placed at the end, because that results in an illogical sequence.

*Does not work*

The frontier scout takes aim, lifting his rifle.

**INCORRECT SENTENCES***Incorrect*

He fell through the air, *landing on his feet*.

*Incorrect*

Dan moved through the dim room, *finally stopping in front of a large closet*.

*Incorrect*

The captain spurred his horse, *pulling away from the scout*.

*Incorrect*

The fleeing criminal abruptly stops, *looking back for anyone chasing him*.

**Participle at End of Sentence**

The incorrect sentences above have two things in common.

1. They have a participial phrase as the *final construction* in the sentence.
2. That final participial phrase in each sentence describes a final action, one that takes place *after* the verb in the sentence.

The reason that the sentences are incorrect is not that they have a participial phrase at the end of the sentence. A participial phrase in that position can be correct. The error lies in logic. The writer is attempting to use the participle, which is not a verb, to tack on

an action that takes place after the true verb in the sentence.

To restate the matter: A participial phrase can only function as an adjective that describes a noun, and that noun is in a relationship with the verb of the sentence. Once the subject has completed the action of the verb (which can have objects and adverbial modifiers), the sentence is over — just like a computer program that has run and finished. The writer cannot add a final action (after the action of the verb) in the form of a participial phrase.

This error is very common. Broadcast journalism uses it regularly, and the result is that people hear it, think that it is correct, and then imitate it.

### ***Correcting the Sentences***

Let's look at the incorrect sentences and provide correct forms for them.

#### *Incorrect*

He fell through the air, landing on his feet.

*(The present participle <landing> is not a verb; it cannot add an action after the verb <fell>.)*

#### *Correct*

Falling through the air, he landed on his feet.

*(We corrected the sentence by turning the verb into a participle and the participle into a verb. That way, the latter action is now a verb. This is often the best way to make a correction. The falling is now a previous action, describing <he>, which is the subject of the verb <landed>.)*

#### *Correct*

He fell through the air and landed on his feet.

*(An excellent way to correct is to use two verbs: <fell> and <landed>.)*



#### *Incorrect*

Dan moved through the dim room, finally stopping in front of a large closet.

*(The present participle <stopping> is not a verb; it cannot add an action after the verb <moved>.)*

#### *Correct*

Moving through the dim room, Dan finally stopped in front of a large closet.

*(Dan is moving first; then he stops. See the correct version below, too.)*

*Correct*

Dan, moving through the dim room, finally stopped in front of a large closet.  
*(The phrase has been put after Dan, but the meaning is the same.)*

*Correct*

Dan moved through the dim room and finally stopped in front of a large closet.  
*(Two verbs; no present participle.)*



*Incorrect*

The captain spurred his horse, pulling away from the scout.  
*(The pulling away is a subsequent action, after the verb <spurred>. The present participle cannot be used in this way.)*

*Correct*

The captain, spurring his horse, pulled away from the scout.  
*(The spurring occurs first, and the participle expresses this. Then the captain pulls away.)*

*Correct*

Spurring his horse, the captain pulled away from the scout.  
*(The participle expresses the spurring, which is a previous (or current) action; then the captain pulled away.)*

*Correct*

The captain spurred his horse and pulled away from the scout.  
*(Two verbs. No problem, because the sentence has no participle.)*



*Incorrect*

The fleeing criminal stops, looking back for anyone chasing him.  
*(The participle <looking> clearly describes an action after the verb <stops>; consequently the construction is illogical.)*

*Correct*

The fleeing criminal, stopping abruptly, looks back for anyone chasing him.  
*(The present participle <stopping> describes what happens first; then the verb <looks> describes what the criminal does.)*

*Correct*

Stopping abruptly, the fleeing criminal looks back for anyone chasing him.

*(The word order is different, but the meaning is the same as in the previous correct version.)*

*Correct*

The fleeing criminal stops abruptly and looks back for anyone chasing him.

*(Two verbs. No problem with a participle.)*

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