

Correspondence

Fixing what ain't broke? Reply to Baranyiová (2017)

In her critique of my article “The using that dangles: to correct or not to correct?”,¹ Baranyiová² argues that none of my examples, in fact, contains a dangling using. She then states that she verified her view with several native English speakers, who confirmed she was right. In defence, let me quote from three influential guidebooks to scientific style – all compiled by native speakers:

- *ASM Style Manual for Journals and Books*³
“Using” calls for special attention because it is so often used incorrectly. Keep in mind that people use things, and studies and experiments may use things, but chemicals, bacteria, laboratory animals, and pieces of equipment do not. If “using” is used incorrectly, replace it with “by” (for procedures) or “with” (for materials and apparatus); use “by using” or reword the sentence as a last resort.
DANGLING: The protein was identified using SDS-PAGE.
IMPROVED: The protein was identified by SDS-PAGE.
DANGLING: Cells were examined using a microscope.
IMPROVED: Cells were examined with a microscope.
- *Scientific Style and Format, 8th edition*⁴
That a participle is dangling may not be apparent when it does not appear at the beginning of the sentence.
The county was surveyed using a Wehrtopf pocket altimeter.
[The agent using the altimeter is unclear. Possible revision: “The workers used a Wehrtopf pocket altimeter to survey the county.”]
- *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, 6th edition*⁵
Dangling modifiers have no referent in the sentence. Many of these result from the use of the passive voice. By writing in the active voice, you can avoid many dangling modifiers.
Correct: Using this procedure, I tested the participants. [I, not the participants, used the procedure.]
Incorrect: The participants were tested using this procedure.

Quoting from the book *Scientific Communication for Natural Resource Professionals*,⁶ which, too, was compiled by native speakers:

- Avoid confusing dangling participles, especially “using.” . . . [A participle] dangles when it modifies the wrong noun. For example, in “We caught the crabs using a trotline,” it is unclear if we used a trotline to catch the crabs or if we caught the crabs using a trotline for some nefarious purpose.

In neither of my first two examples (“was measured using” and “were analysed using”) does the participle have a referent to modify. In my last example (“Peroxidases catalyze the oxidation of various organic compounds using hydrogen peroxide . . .”), the participle does have a logical referent (peroxidases), but grammatically it modifies compounds, the noun nearest it. The ambiguity would have been resolved had the authors inserted by before using or had they used a comma to separate compounds from using.

Baranyiová concludes, “We non-native English speakers should trust and rely on native English speakers with their experience of and feel for their own mother tongue”. I would challenge that conclusion. Native speakers differ in their sense of the language, and they too make mistakes. Therefore, I would not trust a native speaker merely because he or she is such. If in doubt, I would rather consult an authoritative writing guide. Finally, Baranyiová contends that in a scholarly article, “there is no place for literary ambitions”. It seems I was misunderstood. I was not advocating literary grandiloquence in scientific writing. I was only urging us editors to be better guardians of English, a language we all use and love.

The dangling using, of course, is not the worst writing sin. But pick nearly any journal, and you will see plenty of such minor deficiencies (faulty comparisons, violations of parallel structure, etc), which together lower the quality of academic prose. Writer responsibility is thrown to the winds because careless writing is permitted by editors. Nonetheless, proper grammar and elegant expression are just as important as clarity. If they have no place in a research report, then perhaps we ought to stop complaining about English misuse and go with the flow.

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References

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- 2 Baranyiová E. What is really dangling in a sentence? *European Science Editing* 2017;43(2):48.
- 3 ASM Style Manual for Journal and Books. Washington, D.C.; *American Society for Microbiology*, 1991.
- 4 *Scientific Style and Format: The CSE Manual for Authors, Editors, and Publishers*, 8th edition. Chicago, IL; The University of Chicago Press, 2014.
- 5 *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, 6th edition. Washington, D.C.; American Psychological Association, 2009.
- 6 Zale AV, Hewitt DA, Murphy BR. Style, usage, grammar, and punctuation. In: Jennings CA, Lauer TE, Vondracek B (eds). *Scientific Communication for Natural Resource Professionals*. Bethesda, MD; American Fisheries Society, 2012: 33–46.

Commentary on Formatting manuscripts for journal submission – an author's editor's view

I read your piece written by Moira Hudson (1) with great interest – I am currently Editor-in-Chief for 3 journals – one at Elsevier, one at Taylor and Francis and a society journal (Journal of Shellfish Research) and I previously served as EiC of another Elsevier journal for 17 years. I have had first-hand experience with the 'Your Paper, Your Way' effort. It's horrible and I most certainly would not recommend it for any of the journals over which I have any control.

My experience has shown me that it is an open door for a sloppy and often incorrect effort which reflects poorly on the authors in the eyes of the reviewers (and editor). Reference lists are incomplete, information is missing, and often the paper is difficult to follow because section headings or other formatting have been ignored.

It is difficult enough dealing with the ever-increasing number of papers from China and India where the language is a problem from the start, and then having papers that are poorly formatted on top of that. I fully agree with the audience that says lack of attention to detail reflects poorly on the authors and raises doubts with regard to the quality of their science. It is difficult to take a paper seriously when it is full of errors that detract from even reading it or following the references cited – and that is the section that is most often neglected when submitting in 'free form'.

I also see this trend as making it easier and easier to 'shop' papers. I regularly see papers appearing in print that were rejected from a journal that I edit, or that I reviewed

and rejected for other journals – and rejected for very good scientific cause, not formatting. Authors are more interested in having a line on their resume than they are in pursuing academic excellence and they will go to any means to see their work in print. Many of the large publishers are supporting this trend by establishing in-house journals to catch the rejects and publishing them anyway. This cycle is fueled by administrators who place value on quantity over quality and publishers who are more interested in speed and volume than they are in academic excellence.

It seems a small thing to insist that authors comply with journal requirements if they want their work considered for publication in that journal. Personally, I believe they should take enough pride in their presentation and reputation to make their submission as good as it can be prior to the review process.

And finally, it sets an extremely poor precedent for the next generation.

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References

- 1 Hudson M. Formatting manuscripts for journal submission – an author's editor's view. *Eur Sci Ed* 2017;43 (3): 58-59.

New EASE members

EASE would like to welcome the following new members

- Josephine E. Sciortino, Canada
- Estelle Jobson, Switzerland
- Williamina Wilson, Switzerland
- Erick García, Spain
- Tania A. Marszalek, UK

All new members are sent a welcome email when they join the association and are asked why they have joined. The following reasons were given by Erick García:

"Career development and development of professional projects are the main reasons I joined to EASE.

I have been working as a freelance science editor for a company based in Ireland for over a year, and I'm planning to expand my horizons shortly. I hold a Ph.D. in biomedical Sciences, and have authored over 30 scientific publications in prestigious international journals.

Both as an author, and as an editor, it worries me the decline in the quality science writing that is evident in a huge number of published papers. I believe that in a very near future the work of science editors will be extremely valuable, not only for the publication of high quality papers, but also for improving researchers' writing skills.

For this last reason, I have been conducting an on-line science writing workshop for young researchers for almost two years.

As a part of my personal and professional development, I am planning to apply for the BELS (Board of Editors in the Life Sciences) accreditation next year, so I thought that the resources of EASE would be a great asset for this purpose. Also, I will soon launch my own academic editing project as an independent freelancer, and I think that exposure through EASE will be a valuable resource.

I hope to contribute to EASE by taking part in the discussions, maybe writing a few articles every now, and after obtaining BELS accreditation maybe develop a training course for editors aimed at passing the exam."

We look forward to many more contributions.