

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 Journals 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.