



CONSULTING GROUPSM
the people side of business strategy

TiDbits on writing[®] part 9

LETTER FROM TD

In Part 9 of our *TiDbits on Writing*[®] series, we're pleased to present a guest writer — TD's own Anne Vasile — who gives us the scoop on how to rid our writing of silly "danglers."



This is one more of our practical tips to help you tackle the stumbling blocks in writing. Our aim is to guide you to write with clarity — and to do so with confidence. Good luck!

— Laura Winterroth
Managing Director



For back issues of *TiDbits on Writing*[®] or to direct others on how to subscribe free of charge, please go to www.tdgroupusa.com/Publications.

Don't Leave Me Dangling!

"Last night I shot an elephant in my pajamas. How he got in my pajamas, I'll never know." We've all laughed at this classic Groucho Marx one-liner — and can still see him flicking his signature cigar!

This joke may have worked for Groucho, but unintentional laughter is not something we want to elicit with our business writing. We want to say what we mean and leave no room for doubt — or giggles!

Dangling Modifiers

What exactly is wrong with Groucho's sentence? It contains what we call a *dangling modifier*. The phrase "*in my pajamas*" is supposed to refer to (or modify) Groucho, but in this sentence, it looks like it's describing the elephant! A word or phrase "dangles" when it appears too far away from the noun it refers to.

a. We used the family recipe to make cookies handed down for 100 years.

(I think I'll pass on dessert . . .)

b. I know a man with a wooden leg named Smith.

(What's the name of his *other* leg?)

Modifiers don't just dangle in people's writing; they can also be *misplaced* (in the wrong position) or *ambiguous* (not understandable).

Misplaced Modifiers

c. Thrown high in the air, the baby laughed as the toy parachute drifted down to earth.

(Poor baby! Somebody catch him!)

d. The convict waved goodbye to his lawyer as he headed to jail.

(With his lawyer on the way to the pokey, is it any wonder the client was convicted?)

Ambiguous Modifiers

e. Arriving late for class, a pass was needed from the office.

(Did the *pass* arrive late? If not, *who* did?)

f. While showering, the alarm clock went off.

(Why was the clock taking a shower?)

Whether dealing with dangling, misplaced, or ambiguous modifiers, avoid your reader's guffaws — or derision — by following two basic rules:

- ◆ Place words and phrases as *physically close* as possible to the nouns they modify.
- ◆ Use commas and dashes to set apart descriptive phrases.

Here's our fix on examples *a*, *c*, and *e*:

a. We used the family recipe, handed down for 100 years, to make cookies.

c. The baby laughed as the toy parachute — thrown high in the air — drifted down to earth.

e. Arriving late for class, the student needed to get a pass from the office.

Try your hand at reworking sentences *b*, *d*, and *f* to make them clear. Think you can do it? You bet your life! ☐

TiDbits

Published by TD Consulting Group
19 Court Street, Suite 301
White Plains, NY 10601
914-948-8065 fax 914-948-8064
info@tdgroupusa.com
www.tdgroupusa.com