

The World Language Center

Participial and Other Phrases

A participle is a verb used as an adjective or an adverb. Participles generally end with “ing” in the present tense and with “ed” or “en” in the past tense. Many irregular participles exist, such as, the past participle “done” for the verb “do.” Participial phrases are difficult to use, and, until you get very comfortable on how to use them, you may want to leave them out of your papers. Some examples follow.

Participles can be used:

- as an adjective: The mom soon comforted the crying baby.
- as an adverb: She ran screaming from the room. (“Screaming” describes “ran.”)

Do not mix up gerunds (verb + ing) with participles. Gerunds are used as nouns.

- Robert has been traveling all over Europe.
(has = helping verb; been = past participle; traveling = gerund, direct object)

The problem with participial phrases and other phrases is that they describe the words that are right next to them. Here are examples:

Samantha smoothed her skirt and fixed her hair, walking down the street [participle phrase describing “Samantha”] before the interview. **Wrong.**

Hair does not walk anywhere. The participial phrase is misplaced. In other words, the phrase is not right next to what it is describing.

Correct: Walking down the street, Samantha smoothed her skirt and fixed her hair before the interview. (Now Samantha is actually doing the walking.)

Another example is:

Goofy upset Minnie and Mickey, crunching caramel corn during the entire movie.
Who is doing the crunching, and why is anyone getting upset?

Taking out the participial phrase and using a “who” clause instead makes the entire sentence clearer:

Goofy, who was crunching caramel corn during the entire movie, upset Minnie and Mickey.

If you are unsure about participial phrases you can use words such as “who,” “which,” “that,” or “whose” to start clauses instead. But, if you are comfortable in using participial phrases, add them to provide a more creative aspect to your writing.

Descriptions in General— put descriptive words right next to what you are describing

For example: Minnie walked through Disneyland with a bright smile and a large handbag, which is enormous.

The words “bright smile and large handbag” actually describe “Disneyland” here. Also, who or what is enormous? Minnie’s handbag, Disneyland, or Minnie?

A better sentence is: Minnie, with a bright smile and a large handbag, walked through Disneyland, which is enormous.

