

Abusing "Using"

At the end of a talk I gave at the CBE annual meeting in 1994, several members of the audience came forward and generously pressed into my hands bits of paper containing their favorite examples of unconsciously funny writing. Among them was this gem from Alan Brush, of the University of Connecticut, who found it in a Methods section: "Birds were observed using 8x10 binoculars."

This elegant example is among the most treasured in my collection. A birder myself, I am tickled by its image of birds turning the binoculars on their human observers. But I prize it also because it illustrates a solecism nearly universal in technical writing—"using" as a dangling participle. Dangers are not uncommon in such writing, of course, and when you're lucky they can introduce a note of hilarity into an otherwise dull afternoon in the editorial office. (My favorite, from one of our own manuscripts: "First noticed at five weeks of age, the infant would sneeze whenever she was brought into bright sunlight.") But "using" as a dangler is a special case, occurring in almost every manuscript we see.

Why should this be so, when the problem appears to be virtually unknown to the writers of mainstream usage manuals? The culprit, of course, is the passive voice. Dan-

glers occur either when the modifier is too far away from the noun it modifies ("Expertly cooked and attractively presented, the patients enjoyed the improved hospital fare") or when, as in the passive, the noun it modifies is nowhere to be found in the sentence—the usual case with "using" as a dangler. A mainstream writer would simply say, "We used 8x10 binoculars to observe the birds." A science writer would never be so indiscreet; birds may be observed, but no person must ever admit to being involved. Without an actor to modify, "using" has little choice but to dangle uncertainly (and ungrammatically) in the breeze.

The problem is most obvious when, as with those birds, it results in unintended comedy or ambiguity:

"If deafness is a concern, hearing can be tested in infants using brain-stem evoked potentials."

"The endometrial cavity can now be visualized clearly and with minimal discomfort to the patient using transvaginal ultrasonography."

Usually, though, examples are more mundane:

"Venipuncture was performed using a two-syringe technique."

At the *New England Journal of Medicine*, we change "using" in such sentences to "with

use of", "by means of", and other such, admittedly sometimes awkward, substitutes. At *Science* and *JAMA*, they do much the same. "We rail against 'using' as a dangler", says Dawn McCoy, assistant managing editor of *Science*. "Sometimes I wonder if we should be so headstrong about it." Jane Lantz, director of copyediting at *JAMA*, reports, "We change it when it's wrong", but she worries about inexperienced copyeditors who may change it "even when it's right." The newsletter *Copy Editor* has suggested inserting "by" before "using"—a solution both grammatical (see Fowler, 2nd edition, on "gerunds") and graceful.

What do *you* do when you see a sentence like the one about venipuncture above? Do you change it—and if so, how? Do you leave it alone—and if so, why? Send your answers to me by mail or to my assistant by e-mail (to mkacillas@nejm.org). I'll report the results in a future column.

The WordWatcher welcomes your comments and suggestions. You can reach her by mail: Lorraine Loviglio, The Word-Watcher, *New England Journal of Medicine*, 10 Shattuck Street, Boston MA 02115; fax: 617-739-0723; or e-mail: lloviglio@nejm.org

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Send material and editorial inquiries to Martha Tacker, Editor, *CBE Views*, 704 228th NE, Suite 623, Redmond WA 98053; phone: 425-836-3284, fax: 425-836-3284; e-mail: rvnt30a@prodigy.com

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