

# Looking at Language

## Don't Dangle Your Participles in Public

by Richard Lederer, Ph.D.

**T**he very last blooper I was able to insert in my *Anguished English* was this one, which appeared in a major TV magazine in 1987: "Yoko Ono will talk about her husband John Lennon, who was killed in an interview with Barbara Walters."

Wait a minute. Was John Lennon actually killed during his encounter with Barbara Walters?

A few years later I found the following gem gleaming out from the *Boston Globe* TV section: "Former hostage Terry Anderson talks about five years of confinement in Beirut with Barbara Walters in a specially expanded segment of 20/20 at 10 on Channel 5."

Was Terry Anderson forced to spend five years with Barbara Walters?

Incredibly, an AP story that came my way a few years after that included this sentence: "The diving and amateur sports community was in shock Thursday following disclosure by diver Greg Louganis, who speaks freely of his contracting AIDS in a '20/20' interview with Barbara Walters to be broadcast by ABC tonight."

Oh, oh. Was Greg Louganis yet another victim of Barbara Walters? What is it about Barbara Walters, I ask myself, that causes people to dangle their participles in public?

I also ask myself: What is it about the American understanding of grammar that causes people to misplace their modifiers so habitually?

A misplaced modifier occurs when a modifying word, phrase, or clause is located too far away from that which it purports to describe. For example, in the sentence "He only died yesterday," we might ask, "Only died? What could be worse than that?" The statement is unambiguous if the *only* is relocated right next to yesterday: "He died only yesterday."

Misplaced modifiers cause the scaffolding of the sentences they afflict to be firmly planted on mid air. Or to switch the metaphor: Tuck in your shirt and tuck your modifiers securely into each sentence. In general, place modifiers as close as possible to the words they are supposed to modify.

Each of the following sentences has appeared in newspaper articles or student compositions, and each contains a misplaced or dangling modifier. Relocate or undangle each modifier.

1. Abraham Lincoln wrote the Gettysburg Address while traveling from Washington to Gettysburg on the back of an envelope.
2. Although irregular, we will consider your request.
3. Three cars were reported stolen by the Groveton police yesterday.
4. Using a Doppler ultrasound device, fetal heartbeats can be detected by the twelfth week of pregnancy.
5. Locked in a vault for fifty years, the owner of the jewels has decided to sell them.

Answers

1. While traveling from Washington to Gettysburg, Abraham Lincoln wrote the Gettysburg Address on the back of an envelope.
2. Although your request is irregular, we will consider it.
3. Yesterday the Groveton police reported the theft of three cars.
4. Using a Doppler ultrasound device, doctors can detect fetal heartbeats by the twelfth week of pregnancy.
5. The owner of the jewels that were locked in a vault for fifty years has decided to sell them.

Richard Lederer, Ph.D., is the author of more than 3,000 books and articles about language and humor. His syndicated column, "Looking at Language," appears in newspapers and magazines throughout the United States. His new title, *Comma Sense: A Fun-damental Guide to Punctuation*, with John Shore, is now available from St. Martin's Press. E-mail: [richard.lederer@pobox.com](mailto:richard.lederer@pobox.com)



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