
Correspondence

What is really dangling in a sentence?

I read the article “The using that dangles: to correct or not to correct?” by D. Tychinin¹ in the February 2017 issue of *European Science Editing* several times, looking in vain for the dangling word but, alas, I did not find a single example of his “usings” dangling. There is no improvement to be gained in the sentence “Residual activity was measured using the standard assay.” when the author changed it to: “...by using the standard assay.” There is nothing wrong with the investigators behind the scene and using the standard assay – so there is no dangling in this sentence (except, perhaps the scientist himself). It is, for example, not gas chromatography that is analysing the samples, but clearly they are analysed *by* the scientist *using* gas chromatography. This type of sentence occurs mostly in the Materials and Methods section of a paper. That section must be written with the greatest of accuracy to enable the reader to repeat the experiment. Therefore, there is no place for literary ambitions when the content has to be perfectly communicated and understood.

I verified my opinion with several native English speakers who confirmed my perception. Although the author is right that “using” is often dangling, as also R.A. Day² writes: “the word using is, I believe, the most common dangling participle in scientific writing – and supports his experience with the following title: “Using a fiberoptic bronchoscope, dogs were immunized with sheep blood cells”. He provided even more such immortal examples of dangling participles: “Isolation of antigens from monkeys using complement-fixation techniques”. Indeed, “by” too can be nicely dangling as in this example: “Characterization of bacteria causing mastitis by gas-liquid chromatography”². And another title I found recently: “Quantitative analysis of third ventricular size alteration in toy-breed dogs using low field magnetic resonance imaging”.

I would argue with Tychinin that the language style of science is not literary prose: it is the scholarly style of writing. Its function is to communicate science in a succinct, unambiguous way. Science is not written for entertainment in leisure time, but for future work by other scientists. It should be a “clear, concise and unequivocal expression of our best understanding of truth, provided it is used properly”³. Of course, the personal style of authors, their use of words and description can make wonderful reading (here I recall papers by Robert McCance and Elsie Widdowson, the great British physiologists).

The need to adhere to scholarly style and avoid literary prose sometimes poses a serious problem for authors whose mother tongue is one of the Slavic languages, which by nature tend to be more verbose than the sober, matter-of-fact English; this is well-known to editors of international scientific journals. Therefore we non-native English speakers should trust and rely on native English speakers with their experience of and feel for their own mother tongue ... and let them improve our scientific writing.

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References

- 1 Tychinin D: The using that dangles: to correct or not to correct? *European Science Editing* 2017; 43(1): 11.
- 2 Day RA: How to Write and Publish a Scientific Paper. 2nd ed. ISI Press, Philadelphia; 1983.
- 3 Baranyiová E: Correct Terminology in Science: The Role of Editors. *Science Editor* 2013; 36(2):63.

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