The Dangling Modifier

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The Dangling Modifier is produced in association with the National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing
Everyone experiences writer's block at some point during the college years: those dreadful feelings of anxiety caused by being blocked and unable to write. As a deadline nears, this general state of nervousness can escalate to outright panic.

Relax. Writer's block is like the common cold. There is no scientific cure, but there are infinite home remedies available. The next time you or a writer you're working with is stuck staring at an unforgiven blank page, try some of these helpful hints:

*Take control of the assignment by making a list of all the important points to follow. This list will establish a solid base to work from.

*Set aside a time to write. Then, write anything on the topic that you can think of. Write words, lists, sentences, and ideas to sort through later.

*Ask some questions about the topic and write down the answers. Or, try reversing the slant of the topic. Instead of "How is stress harmful," try "How stress makes life exciting."

*Take a walk, drive, or nap. Some of the best ideas come forth when your mind is at rest.

*Change the audience of your piece. Write the assignment for yourself or for a friend. This relieves the tension of meeting a professor's expectations.

*Write from the middle first. Because that first paragraph is often the most difficult, save the introduction for later.

*Organize last. Read over everything you have written. You will be surprised at how many good sentences can be saved.

You and the students who come to the Writing Center should remember that nothing is written in stone. The final product will probably be different from what you initially expected. We need to give ourselves permission to make mistakes. Break through that writer's block by realizing that anything you get on paper is a step forward. And the next time anxiety attacks, fight back! ☺

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**The Dangling Modifier**

**Anxiety Attack**

By Diane Blum
University of Cincinnati

"I admire anyone who has the guts to write anything at all."

~E.B. White

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**The Dangling Modifier**

**Some Writing Bloopers To Tickle Your Humor!**

One of our tutors got this list via e-mail, and we thought you'd enjoy it as much as we have.

1. Something Went Wrong in Jet Crash, Expert Says
2. Police Begin Campaign to Run Down Jay Walkers
3. Safety Experts Say School Bus Passengers Should Be Belted
4. Drunk Gets Nine Months in Violin Case
5. Survivor of Siamese Twins Joins Parents
6. Farmer Bill Dies in House
7. Iraqi Head Seeks Arms
8. Is There a Ring of Debris Around Uranus?
9. Stud Tires Out
10. Prostitute Appeal to Pope
11. Panda Matting Falls; Veterinarian Takes Over
12. Soviet Virgin Lands Short of Goal Again
13. British Left Waffles On Falkland Islands
14. Lung Cancer in Women Mushrooms
15. Eye Drops Off Shelf
16. Teacher Strikes Idle Kids
17. Reagan Wins On Budget, But More Lies Ahead
18. Squad Helps Dog Bite Victim
19. Shot Off Woman's Leg Helps Nicklaus to 66
20. Enraged Cow Injures Farmer with Ax
21. Plane Too Close to Ground, Crash Probe Told
22. Miners Refuse to Work After Death
23. Juvenile Court to Try Shooting Defendant
24. Stone Painting Found by Tree
25. Two Soviet Ships Collide, One Dies
26. Two Sisters Reunited After 18 Years in Checkout Counter
27. Killer Sentenced To Die for Second Time in 10 Years
28. Never Withhold Herpes Infection from Loved One
29. Drunken Drivers Paid $1000 in '84
30. War Dims Hope for Peace
31. If Strike Isn't Settled Quickly, It May Last a While
32. Cold Wave Linked to Temperatures
33. Enfield's Couple Slaughters; Police Suspect Homicide
34. Red Tape Holds Up New Bridge
35. Deer Kill 17,000
36. Typhoon Rips Through Cemetery; Hundreds Dead
37. Man Struck by Lightning Faces Battery Charge
38. New Study of Obesity Looks for Larger Test Group
39. Astronaut Takes Blame for Gas in Spacecraft
40. Kids Make Nutritious Snacks
41. Chef Throws His Heart into Helping Feed Needy
42. Arson Suspect Is Held in Massachusetts Fire
43. British Union Finds Dwarfs in Short Supply
44. Ban on Soliciting Dead in Trotwood
45. Lansing Residents Can Drop Off Trees
46. Local High School Dropout Cut in Half
47. New Vaccine May Contain Rabies
48. Man Minus Ear Waives Hearing
49. Deaf College Opens Doors to Hearing
50. Air Head Fired
51. Steals Clock, Faces Time
52. Prosecutor Releases Probe into Undersheriff
53. Old School Pillars Are Replaced by Alumni
54. Bank Drive-In Window Blocked by Board
55. Hospitals are Sued by 7 Foot Doctors
56. Some Pieces of Rock Hudson Sold at Auction
57. Sex Education Delayed, Teachers Request Training
58. Include Your Children When Baking Cookies

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**Actual Newspaper Headlines, Collected by Actual Journalists!!**
The Dangling Modifier

When Students Are Forced to Visit the Lab
By Hollie A. Funk
University of Cincinnati

A successful peer tutor must learn to recognize the needs of many different students. For example, students who are forced to visit the peer tutor lab require special attention. Typically, these students are embarrassed about coming to the lab and often exhibit a negative attitude. Those who are not confident in their writing will rely heavily on the words of the tutor.

“I’m only here because, according to my professor, I CAN’T pass this essay unless I get help from you,” said Jeff, a sophomore at the University of Cincinnati. An important practice that peer tutors can use that will actually help forced students feel more capable of conquering their writing assignments is using facilitating questions. This practice will benefit a tutee at any point in the writing process and are beneficial in any tutoring session; however, I find that when students are forced to visit the lab these questions are the most beneficial. The questions a tutor chooses will depend on where the tutee is in the writing process.

Take, for example, Julie. It was obvious she was frustrated with her class, professor and essay assignment. She was still searching for ideas and details for her paper topic. To help a tutee develop ideas, a tutor might ask, “Tell me more about…” If an idea is unclear or unrelated the tutor might ask, “Why is this idea unique?” When a student is not using enough detail or is being too vague, a tutor could ask, “What happens next?”

Tim was forced to the peer tutor lab with a complete rough draft requesting advice for revising. I found that reacting like a reader helped him clarify his ideas. As I read the paper I posed reader response questions. The peer tutor reacting like a reader might say, “I get confused here,” or “From the thesis I expected to read…” This will help a tutee narrow the topic and clarify ideas.

Heather was in her final stages of revision when her professor asked her to work with a tutor. She had numerous mechanical and grammatical errors in her essay. The facilitating questions that I asked her actually taught her how to correct these simple mistakes. A tutor helping with grammatical errors might point out the first error and suggest a solution and then have the tutee fix the same problems through the rest of the paper. One might ask, “What is wrong with this?” or “Does this look right to you?” rather than just stating, “This is wrong; you need a comma here.”

Students who are forced to visit the lab are often frustrated and embarrassed. Tutors naturally feel sympathetic and compelled to give tutees the right answers, but it is a dangerous practice for a tutor to begin correcting problems on a tutee’s essay without giving an explanation. Using facilitating questions will not only help students with the writing process but also make them feel more confident about their writing. The suggested questions are merely a beginning. While you’re tutoring, come up with your own questions according to the situation. If we’ve learned anything as tutors, it’s how different the needs are for every tutee.

If you or your colleagues have any more good tips on working with students who have been forced to visit the writing center, please compile them into an article or a list and send them to The Dangling Modifier. We’d love to hear your ideas and share them with our other readers.

Dealing with Creative Writing in the Writing Center
By Sheryl Slocum
Alverno College

Although I agree with Tess Thompson that probably few writing center tutors feel prepared to deal with creative writing assignments, I believe that tutors are actually better prepared than they think. To illustrate, let’s imagine that William Faulkner has brought his work into the Writing Center.

Tutor: Do you realize that you have a two-page sentence here?
Bill: Yes, I’m trying to convey the way a person thinks—the way it’s all jammed together and undefined in his head—just like a paper without paragraph breaks.
Tutor: Good, because that’s exactly how it appears. I notice, though, the sentences on the third page are shorter. Is this all part of the same story?
Bill: Yes, in fact, that’s one of the things that you can help me with—this second character doesn’t think very deeply. So I have to remember to write in short, obvious sentences each time he’s thinking.
Tutor: Who is your audience? Are they going to be able to pick up what you’re doing?
Bill: Oh sure! My audience is the literati of the world. They may think this is a bit unusual at first, but they’ll wade through it and, in the end, they’ll admire the technique—the way form and content work together.

In the above conversation, three principles are illustrated: intention, consistency and audience awareness.

Intention The operative question is “Do you realize...?” Many times the punctuation or grammar errors in creative writing are simply that—errors. If the writer cannot give a reasonable response for her deviation from standard English, chances are that she needs to rework the paragraph.

Consistency A writer can use dialect or unusual constructions in one section of a story or poem, but, when she gets embroiled in her work, she may forget to continue using it. A tutor can point out: “You used ‘thine’ here, but ‘your’ there. Is there a reason for this, or should one of these get changed?”

Audience Awareness A creative writer might forget that some technique she uses may be inappropriate to her audience. Just like Louisa May Alcott’s Jo, who wrote to please herself and her family first, a writer may forget that readers of the Daily Volcano, for instance, aren’t interested in detailed description or long, literary sentences. The question “Will your audience understand what you’re doing here?” can remind a writer that style is due to choice—not chance.

I believe that tutors already unconsciously use these three principles when addressing any student’s writing issues. If they use these principles consciously, they will be able to ask helpful questions for any level of creative writer.
Eighth o'clock Wednesday evening. Cindy, a student at Penn State University, walks all of the way from Pollock Halls to the Boucke Building, climbs a flight of stairs, waits in line, and eventually sits down with a peer tutor. She goes to all this trouble to help a friend with an English paper, but the tutor claims "second hand" tutoring is against policy and sends her packing. "Sorry, Cindy, but if your friend wants help from us, she'd better come here herself." Meanwhile, Nancy, the author, is working at McDonald's where she must earn enough money to pay for what the grants and loans wouldn't cover. She got a C on her last English paper, and now she is driving herself nuts worrying about that rhetorical analysis assigned for next Friday. Luckily, she knows her friend, Cindy, will be able to help her tonight after work.

“What do you mean you can’t help?”

Nancy cries when she hears the news. Cindy is forced to apologize. “I tried, but I just don’t understand this ethos thing.” I really did try, thought Cindy. If only those peer tutors had realize how helpful "secondhand" tutoring could have been.

***

The Writing Center efforts can benefit both Nancy and Cindy. First we will look at Cindy’s side. It is obvious that Cindy could use our help; she would not come to us with Nancy’s paper if she did not. Perhaps she has the same problems with structure or audience as Nancy. Perhaps she has the tendency to make the same grammatical errors. Cindy must improve her reviewing skills if she expects to be able to help Nancy. With our help, she can improve those skills. We can ask Cindy to do exactly what the writer would do in a regular tutorial session; in effect, we can treat Cindy as if she were the writer. We can explain the various techniques we use for reviewing a paper: reading the paper aloud, producing a descriptive outline, and other techniques we have learned in our peer tutoring preparation program. After the session, Cindy will not only be better able to help Nancy with the concept of ethos, but she will also be better at writing and reviewing her own papers.

Nancy (the writer) will also benefit from an absentee tutoring session. Let us suppose that she is unable to come to the Writing Center herself. We should not care why this is the case: perhaps she is sick, maybe she is working, or she could even be mortally afraid of us. All that matters is that she cannot come, but we are still in the position to help improve her writing skills. We are still able to give her this help through Cindy. Focusing on the paper’s structure, tone, audience, and other elements, we can offer the absent writer the same help that we would a writer who is present.

Yes, we will also have to do a little proofreading, but no more than we would with any other writer. The tutor does not need to correct the entire paper; he or she can just note examples of each type of mistake and explain to Cindy the nature of those mistakes. Cindy will then pass this information along to Nancy, and Nancy will have the help she needs to make her own corrections.

***

We are in luck!! With the invention of time travel, the Peer Tutor Underwear Avenger is on the task:

It is again eight o’clock on Wednesday evening. Cindy braves all of the hazards encountered on a brisk spring walk during a beautiful April sunset, and, after much pleasant talk, she finds her way to the Writing Center. She goes to all of this trouble to help a friend with an English paper, but the tutor claims that “secondhand” tutoring is against policy and sends her packing. “Sorry, Cindy, but if your friend wants help from us, she’d better come here herself.”

<<“HA, HA.” This is where a long-haired guy wearing orange Long-Johns jumps into the scene. Unfortunately, time travel is tough work, and a ravenous appetite forces the strange man to McDonald’s. (By some strange coincidence, he is served by Nancy, but that, my friend, is another story.)>>

I know; I’ll just pretend it is my paper, thinks Cindy, and she goes to The Human Development Center (one of Penn State’s other Writing Center locations). Cindy’s actions, however, are plagiarism, and the strict-but-fair god, Cited Works, strikes her with a bolt of lightening. In the ensuing confusion many fact reports are burned, the two on-duty peer tutors are killed, and certain humans are left undeveloped for an undetermined amount of time.

Cindy’s last thought is this: If only those peer tutors had realize how helpful "secondhand" tutoring could have been. And grammar is once again left uncorrected.

The end.

(continued on page 7)
(continued from page 7)

Besides our inability to help absentee writers, by attempting to help them we as tutors also commit an indirect breach of Center and University guidelines and policy. The Pennsylvania State Handbook for Peer Tutors in Writing says, "We must remember at all times that the writer is ultimately the one responsible for the work, and we want to help the writer to the best of our ability." (12). This guideline relates our idea that the writer's paper should always remain the writer's paper, and we shouldn't tell the writer how to change mistakes in a paper. By asking questions we point out that there is a problem and we encourage the writer to come up with his or her own solution to it. When the writer isn't present, the changes are made by a friend or, indirectly, the tutor. A friend may take the tutor's advice into consideration and write down what seems to him or her to be the best solution. A friend may also write down word-for-word what the tutor suggests, even if the tutor discourages this. Thus, the paper is no longer only the writer's. Not only does this go against the Center's guideline's, it may also constitute a breach of University policy. In the case of changes made by a friend that are more than grammatical corrections, such as restructuring of sentences and larger changes of that kind, the words used in the paper are not the writer's own but are not cited as someone else's. Whether or not anyone could discover such an obscure plagiarism, it is plagiarism nonetheless, and the Center has had an indirect hand in its creation.

By implementing a policy against tutoring absentee writers, the Center could avoid inconvenient and embarrassing problems such as the ones related above. Also, as we tutors can gain unity by ridding ourselves of the disharmony that this debate has induced. No matter how strongly we feel, we must admit that this job can be hard on us as it is, and that it would be even harder if we didn't have each other to share its burdens with. In order to curb the widening of our disagreement, we have to immediately think the matter through and make a decision. In order to serve writers and our university better, we have to make the best decision.

Submission Information:
The Dangling Modifier welcomes submissions of 500 words or fewer and strongly encourages you to submit shorter pieces. Submissions do not have to be formal essays—they can be poems, drawings, lists, etc. Editors reserve the right to edit submissions for grammar and length. Please include your address, telephone number, and e-mail address so we can contact you about any stylistic changes or questions.

Submissions can be sent in the following ways:
mail: The Dangling Modifier, 219 Boucke Building, University Park, PA, 16802; e-mail: ttb171@psu.edu; or fax: (814) 863-9814.
Any questions? Please e-mail us or call us at (814) 865-1841.

The Dangling Modifier

The Director's Chair:
Distant Developments: Using the Kentucky TeleLInk Network to Mentor Peer Tutors
By Gail Cammins, Writing Center Director
University of Kentucky

If we contextualize the theory and practice of peer tutors use while consulting is to see their multiple approaches—essential for good writing center practice. As Joyce Kinkhead and Jeanette Harris note in their introduction to Writing Centers in Context: Twelve Case Studies, "Successful programs establish relationships with their host environments that are best described as interactive—the writing center shapes its context as well as being shaped by it." (xvi).

Distance learning technology—particularly interactive television video and electronic communication—is an excellent method for peer tutors to see the contexts that make up their work. By sharing theory and practice with peer tutors in other centers, tutors articulate and understand their own, thus creating a mentoring system for peer tutor development.

Peer tutors at the University of Kentucky Writing Center and the Southeast Community College Academic Support Center are in the middle of sharing their contexts. Through a graduated series of interactions—virtual (e-mail), semi-virtual (interactive television network, or ITV), and real (UK tutors are planning to drive 180 miles to visit their Southeast Community College partners)—tutors are sharing the theory and practice of their work.

Initially, both groups of tutors read Stephen North's article "The Idea of a Writing Center" and Leigh Ryan's discussion of the many hats tutors use while consulting, found in The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors. In addition, the tutors e-mailed one another, asking about their centers' work and what it is to be a consultant.

Next both groups went to ITV classrooms located on their home campuses. Through cameras and microphones, we met one another visually, held another discussion of North's article, and brainstormed the roles tutors play in our respective centers. From the ITV session, we will write a collaborative presentation on peer tutoring roles for the National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing, to be held at the University of Kentucky next October.

Besides the excitement of trying new pedagogical technologies, this peer tutor mentoring program has had other benefits. First, to understand the context of another's center is to begin to grasp the workings of one's own. Second, to discuss theoretical and practical issues of consultation with someone at a different tutoring center is to sort out what we really think, as well as receive feedback on our thoughts. Third, to collaborate is to have more minds to create better work.

Because we are still in the thick of "distant developments," I can't comment, here, on the weaknesses of this program. I can merely offer this as a tease (after all, it is breeding season in the Bluegrass): This is an invitation for everyone to attend the collaborative venture of University of Kentucky and Southeast Community College Peer Tutors at next fall's National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing. There we will assess the true impact of our work in the distance. We hope you will "really" be there!

National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing News

Calling All Peer Tutors:

Come collaborate with peer tutors from colleges and universities across the nation! The University of Kentucky hosts this year’s National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing the weekend of October 24-26. Dr. Gail Cummins, Director of the University of Kentucky Writing Center, along with her peer tutors, have a fun-filled, educational weekend planned.

The NCPPW allows peer tutors across the nation to share their experiences with tutor training, work across the disciplines, tutor outreach, technology, and various other tutor-oriented issues, in an attempt to enhance tutorials.

This year’s Conference will focus on peer tutors as leaders in collaborative learning, with a collaborative keynote presentation by Ronald Maxwell and Twila S. Page and the peer tutors from Penn State and Kollins College.

Take note! This will not be your ordinary conference! The University of Kentucky peer tutors, along with Dr. Cummins, has arranged for this year’s Conference to be unique. The Conference will be held at both the Wyndham hotel and the University of Kentucky. Participants will tour the University and will have the privilege of hearing the Central Kentucky Youth Choir perform. Some peer tutors will experience Kentucky college life by lodging in UK’s and Transylvania University’s dormitories. In addition, peer tutors will gather for a banquet on Saturday night, and all will be entertained by the best night life Lexington has to offer.

The Conference itself, however, will be entertaining enough! UK’s peer tutors are now accepting paper proposals and performance proposals for the conference. Paper proposals should be one page in length and introduce themes associated with peer tutors as leaders in collaborative learning. Collaborative performances (up to five people per group) are also encouraged. These proposals should also be one page in length, and the performance itself should last 3-5 minutes.

If you would like to be involved in the NCPPW, please send your proposal(s) to Dr. Gail Cummins via e-mail (writing@pop.uky.edu) or snail mail (University of Kentucky, Department of English, 1215 Patterson Office Tower, Lexington, KY 40506-0027).

Brandy Hyatt, UK Peer Tutor

Tutees Tutoring Tutors

By Kelly Sollhein
University of Cincinnati

I only took two weeks of peer tutoring to make me realize what a significant impact peer tutoring would have on my life. In those weeks, I began to discover unexplored areas of my “self.” Being a peer tutor surprisingly triggered a much needed self-evaluation. Each writer guided me toward identifying my interests and character.

The most significant realization triggered by being a peer tutor was the acknowledgment of the enjoyment and self-gratification I received from helping other students. This, in itself, caused me to reconsider my original choice of becoming a pharmacy major. I realized I would rather work with people than with pills. It wasn’t until after I began to reconsider my major that I really started to realize just how worthwhile peer tutoring was going to be. Now that I look back, I can see how the tutees really helped me grow into the person I am today. It was like a role reversal—I became the tutee and the tutees the tutors. Tutees’ consistency and determination demonstrated in the writing center became a part of my “self.” When I saw the same student come to the writing center day after day, struggling to write a good essay, I was reminded of my harder classes and thus became more determined to succeed in them. Tutoring answered many questions I had, such as “Do I have any talents?” or “Am I successful?” Times when I feel I possess no special skill or ability, I remember that I’m a peer tutor. Whether it be with one person or a hundred, I do make some sort of difference. This, I have found, meets my definition of true success. Thanks to the experience of peer tutoring, I have come to realize this desire to make a difference. Now, I can make it a reality. 

The Importance of Correct Punctuation

One of the members of our staff found this piece and shared it with the rest of us. It is, of course, “English” humor, but you may find that some of the writers you help have similar problems!

Dear John:

I want a man who knows what love is all about.

You are generous, kind, thoughtful. People who are not like you admit to being useless and inferior.

You have ruined me for other men. I yearn for you. I have no feelings whatsoever when we’re apart. I can be forever happy—will you let me be yours?

Gloria

Dear John:

I want a man who knows what love is all about. All about you are generous, kind, thoughtful people, who are not like you. Admit to being useless and inferior. You have ruined me. For other men, I yearn. For you, I have no feelings whatsoever. When we’re apart, I can be forever happy. Will you let me be?

Yours,

Gloria

Editor’s Note:

The staff of this newsletter does not necessarily agree with all the opinions expressed in all the articles. We do, however, want this newsletter to express the range of ideas and opinions of all our readers. If you find any article particularly provocative, please respond to it with an article of your own.
Writing Center Analogy

Colby, UVM, Baker

This poem came from the activities of the last year's conference in Oklahoma City.

Writing Centers are like self-serve
gas stations. Some people think from
a distance, the sign says “Full Service.”
They are always in a hurry and expect
you to run out and help them. They
want the oil changed, tank filled, windows
cleaned, tires aired and washer fluid
topped off. And, of course, the less money
they spend, the more they want.
Instead of waiting till empty and two
hours before the trip like they always
do, they should come in early and learn to pump
their own gas.

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