Participles Becoming Prepositions –
Some Arcane Information for Editors

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In English, some participles have already become prepositions. The author noticed in her work as a technical editor that most of her writers seemed to perceive the participle *using* as a preposition already although it is not listed as such in the dictionary. The paper gives the evidence and rationale for making such a claim. It offers a window on written language change in progress and celebrates the language user's ability to make the stolid dialect we call technical writing more vigorous and efficient by turning a participle into a preposition.

Introduction

In a *Harper's* article, David Foster Wallace characterized himself as a SNOOT, "somebody who knows what *dysphemism* means and doesn't mind letting you know it." Near synonyms are Grammar Nazi, Usage Nerd, Syntax Snob, and Language Police (Wallace, 2001, p. 39). This is not a flattering picture, but like Wallace, many of us who end up making our living as writers and editors take a quiet pride in our SNOOTitude—we are the few and the brave, the dwindling scions of a long and noble heritage of English literacy.

Nowhere do SNOOTS shine more brightly than when we are able to display our knowledge of arcane rules involving participles and prepositions. These parts of speech seem to be the locus of particular scorn and anxiety for the non-SNOOT world. In the same article, Wallace says "we SNOOTS know when and how to hyphenate phrasal adjectives and to keep participles from dangling, and we know that we know, and we know how very few other Americans know this stuff or even care, and we judge them accordingly" (p. 39).

As SNOOTS of the technical communication species, we often use our specialized knowledge of participles and prepositions to avoid using them. For example, the following sentence needs work:

Moving all the toys to the garage, there was no room left for the car.

Most would find it sufficient to recast this as

Moving all the toys to the garage, we left no room for the car.

But this is unlikely to satisfy the technical writer, who likes to make logical relationships explicit. She might recast it thus:

> There was no room left for the car because we moved all the toys to the garage.

And the offending participle is completely eliminated. Paula LaRocque in *The Quill* expresses a view of prepositions common among journalists and tech writers: "Another sign of deadwood is seen in the preposition . . .. Pruning prepositions is usually one way to leaner writing." Instead of *performing the identification of,* we want you to say *identify*. (This evokes another favourite rule among technical writers: avoid nominalizations, i.e., don't look for convoluted ways to turn verbs into nouns.)

Prepositions are nevertheless an essential element in even the simplest and most direct mode of English expression. This paper offers a window on written language change in progress and celebrates the language user's ability to make the stolid dialect we call technical writing more vigorous and efficient by turning a participle into a preposition.

A New Use for *Using*

I worked for seven years as a technical editor and writer at a state university research institute that employed about 150 engineers, chemists, and geologists. One day, I was routinely exercising my authority as hired SNOOT to eliminate dangling participles, as in "These data were placed within a time frame of 5240 to 2585 yr BP using radiocarbon dating." I would have to recast the sentence in the active voice to give *using* something to modify:

> Researchers using radiocarbon dating placed these data within a time frame of 5240 to 2585 yr BP.

or

> Using radiocarbon dating, researchers placed these data within a time frame of 5240 to 2585 yr BP.

I thought, "That sentence didn't really bother me as it was. It was perfectly understandable, and since I'm editing scientific material, many times I won't have the option of recasting in the active voice."

I started to see my writers creating similar sentences in almost every document I edited:

Using a new sample preparation method involving freeze-drying, individual ash particles with diameters as small as 0.1 μm can be analyzed automatically in the ADEM.

Then I came across this one,

Using previous experience and general knowledge of mercury chemistry, we designed the cryogenic trapping system using Teflon and quartz components.

which I recast as

Using previous experience and general knowledge of mercury chemistry, we designed the cryogenic trapping system with Teflon and quartz components.

I had replaced the participle with a preposition, and it worked just fine. I began to routinely replace *using* with *with* whenever I needed to. I also began to notice many examples where *using* performed the same function as *with*, and my writers seemed to perceive it as almost synonymous, as in the two examples below:

Physical and chemical characterization of the pellet fuel was performed using the standard analytical methods and with advanced analysis methods.

Moisture measurements can be collected with a soil moisture meter or using tensiometers.

Moreover, our writers knew (after years of nagging) that we did not put title caps on prepositions under six letters long. They frequently left *using* all lowercase in their titles and table headings as if it were a preposition:

Opportunities for Hydrogen Energy Conversion using a Flex-Microturbine™

Color Development using Colorimetric Indicators

Soil Flushing using Alcohol and Humic Acids

Iowa's Thickness Design Guide for Low-Volume Roads using Reclaimed Hydrated Class C Fly Ash Bases

Laboratory-Scale Testing using the Conversion and Environmental Process Simulator

Some Participles Are Already Prepositions

Fascinated by the pattern I was seeing, I did some dictionary research, which confirmed that at least three former participles in English were now officially identified as prepositions—*concerning, past,* and *regarding*, as in the examples below from Cambridge Dictionaries Online:

I've had a letter from the tax authorities concerning my tax payments.

I live on Station Road, just past the post office.

The company is being questioned regarding its employment policy.

One participle is even considered a conjunction:

Assuming (that) the Fe concentrations measured by Sandia were constant, the iron peaks were used as an interval standard for comparison of Cr peak intensities.

In the sentences below, *using* could be read as either a correctly used participle or a preposition:

Using this calculation technique, the LIBS–CPT was able to successfully detect and estimate quantities of Cr in the subsurface.

Sulfur speciation analyses using EPA Method 8 and a controlled condensation method at temperatures of 275° and 58° C indicate that although $SO_2(g)$ concentrations increase significantly with increasing coke blending, $SO_2(g)$ remains undetectable (<0.5 ppmv).

In the second example, *with* would work, but *using* is better—the semantic content carried by *using* gives a more precise reading—*with* seems vague here. Prepositions are primarily functional elements, but they carry content as well. For example, *through*, *under*, and *over* all carry information on spatial orientation; *for* conveys a benefactive meaning; *with* both conveys accompaniment and indicates that an object was used as a tool. *Using* could take over the second sense carried by *with*, the notion of tool, in many cases giving us a more precise and to-the-point means of expression.

Implications for Technical Communicators

This relationship between participles and prepositions makes the notion of dangling participles less rigid. It would be helpful to treat *using* as a preposition when the human actor disappears, as is often the case in technical prose, because unlike participles, prepositions aren't said to dangle—they are more flexible as modifiers than participles:

> Using appropriate eluents, the separation of the two prominent redox states of vanadium was easily achieved.

> The minerals themselves were identified using usual methods relying on physical characteristics such as color, hardness, cleavage, and luster.

> Four-inch cores were extracted at each site using a drill rig.

There is the danger that we will make a perfectly intelligible sentence more difficult to process or annoy a researcher who still likes the sound of the impersonal passive if we insist on treating *using* as a participle and eliminating the dangle. Technical writing is above all practical. If writers and readers are indeed processing *using* as a preposition, as editors we need to be aware of this. We should seek consensus and be willing to make decisions based on practice as well as on our grammatical etiquette rules whenever there is a clear indication of a language change in process that is meeting a clear need. *Using* presents one such clear case.

References

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