

# MPC English & Study Skills Center

## Participial Phrases

### Introduced by a Participial Verb Form

Participial phrases begin with either a present participle (**verb + ing**) or a past participle (**verb + d, ed, n, en, or t**) and include any modifiers that complete the idea. These phrases are used as adjectives within a sentence to modify nouns. When possible, they should come either immediately before or after the words they describe and may appear at the beginning, in the middle, or at the end of a sentence.

### Beginning Participial Phrases

These must come right before the nouns that they describe. An introductory phrase is followed by a comma.

**Swinging from the trees**, the monkey chattered at me.

The "monkey" (the noun that follows the phrase) is in the trees.

**Swinging from the tree**, I saw the monkey.

In this case, "I" (the noun that follows the phrase) am swinging from the trees, not the monkey.

**Working late**, Jiang fell asleep at the desk.

Jiang was working late.

**Thrilled to win the prize**, Mary tripped when she ran up the stairs.

Mary won the prize.

**Driven beyond endurance**, Shiu packed his bags and left.

Shiu is driven beyond endurance.

**Note: If the participial phrase precedes the wrong noun, the meaning is unclear.**

**Exhausted after two hours of running**, Sandra saw her husband collapse at the finish line.

In this case, it seems clear that the husband is the one who is exhausted, but the structure of the sentence means that it is Sandra who is exhausted.

**Rewrite for clarity: Exhausted after two hours of running**, Sandra's husband collapsed at the finish line. --or--

Sandra saw her husband, **exhausted after two hours of running**, collapse at the finish line.

## Middle Participial Phrases

These follow the nouns that they describe and have no commas around them if the information is necessary to identify or understand those nouns. They **do** have commas around them if the information is **not** necessary.

The man **holding the gun** is John Barrett.

"Holding the gun" helps to identify which man, so no commas are used.

The woman **wearing a red dress** lives in the neighborhood.

"Wearing a red dress" helps to identify which woman, so no commas are used.

The moon robot, **activated by a remote switch**, started moving slowly across the surface.

The "moon robot" is already clearly identified, and "activated by a remote switch" adds information that is **not** necessary for identification, so commas are required.

The housewife, **kept in the dark about finances**, didn't know the bank account was empty.

Again, "kept in the dark" adds information but is **not** necessary to understand the main thought of the sentence, so commas are required.

Jenna Kim, **driven wild with anger**, shot her husband.

Proper nouns, such as "Jenna Kim," are considered identified, so a participial phrase that follows is not necessary for identification and must have commas.

## Ending Participial Phrases

These are often set off by commas for emphasis, especially if they are not directly after the nouns that they modify or describe, which often occurs. If emphasis is **not** needed, or if the information **is** necessary to identify the noun, **no** commas are used.

I saw the monkey **swinging from the trees**.

"Swinging from the trees" follows the noun ("monkey") that it describes, and no special emphasis seems needed, so no commas are used.

Huang followed the crowd, **fearing being left behind**.

In this case, "fearing being left behind" describes "Huang," not "the crowd," so the comma is necessary to separate "crowd" from the phrase. This pause helps the reader to understand the meaning.

**Note:** It is always better for clarity to put the participial phrase right next to the noun it describes, but it is sometimes awkward to construct a sentence that way, and the phrase occurs more naturally at the end of the sentence.

The monkey threw food at the teenagers, **provoked by their actions.**

A comma follows "teenagers" to separate it from the participial phrase and helps to make it clear that the "monkey" is the one provoked.

**Note:** The pronoun "their" also helps to make the meaning clear.

Maribel cleaned up the milk **spilled on the desk.**

There is no comma because "spilled on the desk" describes which milk (not the milk on the floor, for example) and is identifying.

John hit the man **waving a gun.**

No commas are used here because "waving the gun" identifies which man was hit.

**Note:** A comma could mean either that the information is not identifying or that John has the gun. In that case, the participial phrase would be ambiguous or confusing.