**What is a participle?**

A participle is a verbal that acts as an adjective.

Consider the different verb forms in this sentence:

*My father's hair,****streaked****with gray and****receding****on both sides,****is combed****straight back to his collar.*

The main verb (or [predicate](http://grammar.about.com/od/pq/g/predterm.htm) ) of the sentence is the phrase **is combed**. The other two verbs forms are participles:

* **streaked** is a [past participle](http://grammar.about.com/od/pq/g/pastpartterm.htm), formed by adding **-ed** to the present form of the verb ("streak");
* **receding** is a [present participle](http://grammar.about.com/od/pq/g/prespartterm.htm), formed by adding **-ing** to the verb ("recede").

Both participles work as adjectives and follow the noun they modify: "hair."

Like regular adjectives, participles may also appear in front of the nouns they modify:

The **whispering** breeze scattered seeds across the **abandoned** fields.

Here, both the present participle **whispering** and the past participle **abandoned** stand in front of the nouns they describe ("breeze" and "fields").

**Participial Phrases**

Both present and past participles can be used in phrases--called [***participial phrases***](http://grammar.about.com/od/pq/g/partphraseterm.htm)**--**that modify nouns and pronouns. A participial phrase is made up of a participle and its modifiers. A participle may be followed by an [object](http://grammar.about.com/od/mo/g/objecterm.htm), an [adverb](http://grammar.about.com/od/ab/g/adverbterm.htm), a [prepositional phrase](http://grammar.about.com/od/pq/g/prephraseterm.htm), an [adverb clause](http://grammar.about.com/od/ab/g/qdvclterm.htm), or any combination of these. Here, for example, the participial phrase consists of a present participle (**holding**), an object (**the torch**), and an adverb (**steadily**):

*Holding the torch steadily, Merdine approached the monster.*

In the next sentence, the participial phrase includes a present participle (**making**), an object (**a great ring**), and a prepositional phrase (**of white light**):

*Merdine waved the torch over her head, making a great ring of white light.*

Let's practice by combining these three sentences, turning the first and third into participial phrases:

* I guided the pinball through the upper chutes, down a runover lane, off the slingshot bumpers to the flippers.
* I cradled it there.
* I bounced it back and forth until I had a perfect shot through the spinner.

To emphasize the quick, successive actions described in these three sentences, we can combine them by turning the verbs **guided** and **bounced** into present participles:

***Guiding****the ball through the upper chutes, down a runover lane, off the slingshot bumpers to the flippers, I cradled it there,****bouncing****it back and forth until I had a perfect shot through the spinner.* (J. Anthony Lucas, "The Inner Game of Pinball")

Note that participial phrases can't stand alone as complete sentences: they must modify a noun or pronoun in the sentence.

**Arranging Participial Phrases**

A participial phrase is flexible, a structure that can be placed at the beginning, middle, or end of a sentence. Participial phrases may be arranged to show a sequence of actions, as in the "pinball" sentence just seen. They may also be set up to show that two or more actions are occurring at the same time:

*The eagles swooped and hovered,****leaning on the air****, and swung close together,****feinting and screaming with delight****.* (N. Scott Momaday, *House Made of Dawn*)

In this sentence, the eagles were **"leaning on the air"** *as* they **"hovered"**; they were **"feinting and screaming with delight"** *as* they swung close together.

Though you can shift a participial phrase to different positions, don't risk awkwardness or confusion by placing it too far from the word it modifies. For example**, a participial phrase usually precedes the**[**main clause**](http://grammar.about.com/od/pq/g/participterm.htm)**, sometimes follows the**[**subject**](http://grammar.about.com/od/rs/g/subject.htm)**, but only rarely appears at the end of the sentence.**

In each sentence below, the participial phrase clearly modifies the subject ("my younger sister") and suggests a cause:

* **Discouraged by the long hours and low pay**, my sister finally quit her job.
* My sister, **discouraged by the long hours and low pay**, finally quit her job.

But consider what happens when the participial phrase moves to the end of the sentence:

* My sister finally quit her job, **discouraged by the long hours and low pay**.

Here the logical order of cause-effect is reversed, and as a result the sentence may be less effective than the first two versions.

**Dangling Phrases**

A participial phrase should refer clearly to a noun or pronoun in the sentence. We have to be careful when combining sentences such as these:

*I curled my toes and squinted.
The doctor prepared to puncture my arm with a needle.*

Notice what happens if we drop "I" and change the first sentence to a participial phrase:

**Curling my toes and squinting**, the doctor prepared to puncture my arm with a needle.

Here the participial phrases refer to "the doctor" when they should refer to "I"--a pronoun that's not in the sentence. This kind of problem--called a [dangling modifier](http://grammar.about.com/od/d/g/danglmodterm.htm) --should be avoided.

We can correct this dangling modifier either by adding "I" to the sentence or by replacing the participial phrase with an [adverb clause](http://grammar.about.com/od/ab/g/qdvclterm.htm):

* **Curling my toes and squinting**, I waited for the doctor to puncture my arm with a needle.
* **As I curled my toes and squinted**, the doctor prepared to puncture my arm with a needle.

**PRACTICE 1:** Rewrite each sentence below, adding the [participial phrase](http://grammar.about.com/od/pq/g/partphraseterm.htm) given in parenthesis. Be sure to position the participial phrase so that it refers clearly and logically to a [noun](http://grammar.about.com/od/mo/g/nounterm.htm) in the [main clause](http://grammar.about.com/od/pq/g/participterm.htm). In other words, avoid [misplaced modifiers](http://grammar.about.com/od/mo/g/mismodterm.htm) and [dangling modifiers](http://grammar.about.com/od/rs/g/squinterm.htm).

1. I could hear thunder.
(rumbling in the distance)

1. Professor Legree repeated his favorite joke.
(encouraged by the polite applause of the audience)

1. The children gazed at the monkeys.
(hanging by their tails from the branches)

1. The monkeys stared back at the children.
(hanging by their tails from the branches)

1. I watched the sun rise over the ridge.
(blazing over houses, farms, and fields)

1. The first baseman bobbled the line drive.
(distracted by an ostrich in the dugout)
2. I found the kitten.
(trapped inside the clothes hamper)
3. Little Danny waited for the thunderstorm to pass.
(hiding inside the clothes hamper)

1. Merdine found a cupcake.
(hidden behind the refrigerator).

1. I hummed along with the music.
(pushing my cart down the aisle of the supermarket)

**PRACTICE 2:** Combine the sentences in each set below into a single clear sentence with at least one [participial phrase](http://grammar.about.com/od/pq/g/partphraseterm.htm). Here's an example:

* I stood on the roof of my apartment building at dawn.
* I watched the sun rise through crimson clouds.

*Sample combination:* Standing on the roof of my apartment building at dawn, I watched the sun rise through crimson clouds.

1. The dishwasher was invented in 1889.
The dishwasher was invented by an Indiana housewife.
The first dishwasher was driven by a steam engine.
2. I took small sips from a can of Coke.
I was sitting on the ground in a shady corner.
I was sitting with my back against the wall.

1. I was sitting on the window ledge.
The ledge overlooked the narrow street.
I watched the children.
The children were frolicking in the first snow of the season.

1. The first edition of *Infant Care* was published by the U.S. Government.
The first edition of *Infant Care* was published in 1914.
The first edition of *Infant Care* recommended the use of peat moss for disposable diapers.

1. The house sat stately upon a hill.
The house was gray.
The house was weather-worn.
The house was surrounded by barren tobacco fields.

1. I washed the windows in a fever of fear.
I whipped the squeegee swiftly up and down the glass.
I feared that some member of the gang might see me.

1. Goldsmith smiled.
He bunched his cheeks like twin rolls of toilet paper.
His cheeks were fat.
The toilet paper was smooth.
The toilet paper was pink.

1. The roaches scurried in and out of the breadbox.
The roaches sang chanteys.
The roaches sang as they worked.
The roaches paused only to thumb their noses.
They thumbed their noses jeeringly.
They thumbed their noses in my direction.

1. The medieval peasant was distracted by war.
The medieval peasant was weakened by malnutrition.
The medieval peasant was exhausted by his struggle to earn a living.
The medieval peasant was an easy prey for the dreadful Black Death.

1. He eats slowly.
He eats steadily.
He sucks the sardine oil from his fingers.
The sardine oil is rich.
He sucks the oil with slow and complete relish.

Nordquist, Richard. "Creating and Arranging Participial Phrases." *About Education*. About.Com, n.d. Web. 4 Aug. 2014.