

Agreement between Implied vs. Actual Subjects

In this worksheet we step out of the realm of punctuation to bring attention to a common error.

When opening a sentence with an introductory participial phrase, or any adjectival phrase, many writers fail to make the implied subject of the phrase agree with the actual subject of the sentence (as the implied subject of this sentence agrees with its actual subject). Strunk and White in The Elements of Style provide excellent examples of the ways this lack of agreement can create ambiguity. Here is their final, “ludicrous” example: “Being in a dilapidated condition, I was able to buy the house very cheap.” Remember, the introductory phrase should point toward the subject of the sentence.

Examples that lack agreement

1. Having read through a wide range of Boswell’s manuscripts, he certainly appears to be an author who recorded life with extraordinary detail. {*The implied subject is someone who has read a wide range of Boswell’s manuscripts; the actual subject is Boswell.*}
2. Speaking much too quickly, the audience was befuddled by the speech. {*The implied subject is someone speaking; the actual subject is the audience listening to the speech.*}
3. After hearing that the schnauzer had saved the beloved key, the dog was heartily congratulated by its family. {*Here we have a complex introductory prepositional phrase. The implied subject is the person or persons who heard about the heroic schnauzer; the actual subject is the schnauzer itself.*}
4. Old and cranky, the telephone was despised by the professor. {*The implied subject is the old and cranky professor; the actual subject is the telephone.*}

Agreement between implied and actual subjects

Sample Sentences

Rewrite the following sentences so that implied and actual subjects agree.

1. Running every morning at 6 am, the road became an old friend to Todd.

The implied subject of the introductory phrase is the person running; the actual subject of the sentence is the road. The sentence might be rewritten thus:
Running every morning at 6 am, Todd became old friends with the road.

2. Upon discovering that shoes were less expensive when bought on line, several pairs were bought for the family.

The implied subject is the person who discovered the inexpensive shoes; the actual subject of the sentence is several pairs. *Upon discovering that shoes were less expensive when bought on line, Todd (or whomever) bought several pairs for the family.*

3. Unhappy and discouraged by the weather, the garden was planted despite the rainy day.

The implied subject is whoever is discouraged by the weather; the actual subject of the sentence is the garden. *Unhappy and discouraged by the weather, Todd planted despite the rainy day.*

4. Having grasped the connection between exercise and good eating, the garden took on greater significance in the family's life.

The implied subject is whoever grasped the connection; the actual subject of the sentence is the garden. *Having grasped the connection between exercise and good eating, Todd realized that the garden would take on greater significance in the family's life.*

5. Without proper knowledge of fertilizer, the potatoes were inundated by Todd's friend.

The implied subject is Todd's friend who didn't have the proper knowledge of fertilizer; the actual subject of the sentence is the potatoes. *Without proper knowledge of fertilizer, Todd's friend inundated the potatoes.*

Agreement between implied and actual subjects

6. An easy thing to blunder, Cue didn't know the first thing about fertilizer.

The implied subject is over fertilizing; the actual subject of the sentence is Cue, Todd's friend. *An easy thing to blunder, the amount of fertilizer used was excessive.* Perhaps a better way to revise this sentence is to rework the introductory phrase: *Making an easy blunder, Cue didn't know the first thing about fertilizer.*

7. E-mailing Todd later that evening, the predicament could not have been more predictable.

The implied subject is Cue, who is e-mailing Todd; the actual subject of the sentence is the predicament. *E-mailing Todd later that evening, Cue could not have been in a more predictable predicament.*

8. An early sleeper, the e-mail did not arrive until after Todd was in bed.

The implied subject is Todd; the actual subject of the sentence is the e-mail. *An early sleeper, Todd did not receive the e-mail before he had gone to bed.* Again, it might be better to rework the introductory phrase: *Sent too late at night, the e-mail did not arrive until Todd, an early sleeper, was in bed.*

9. With a certain melancholy apprehension, time needed to pass before Cue would know the truth.

The implied subject is who or whatever had a melancholy apprehension – my guess is that it is Cue, not time itself; the actual subject of the sentence is time. *With a certain melancholy apprehension, Cue understood that time needed to pass before he would know the truth.*

10. Lucky for him, both potatoes and garden recovered quickly.

This is tricky, and probably acceptable as it stands. The introductory word is "lucky"; the prepositional phrase, "for him" is modifying "lucky" and at a glance makes it seem that the implied subject must be a him, Cue. It is the word "lucky," that is doing the modification, though, and an author might describe both the potatoes and the garden as "lucky," not just Cue.