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Ask the Book Doctor: Advertising versus Speaking Engagements, Gerund Use, and Singular Verbs

By Bobbie Christmas

Q: I've been offered a big discount on an ad in a national magazine that appeals to poets and other writers. The magazine plans a special section that features new writers, and I want to promote my poetry book in that section. What do you think? Should I spend my money promoting my poetry book in a magazine?

A: When was the last time you bought a book because you saw an advertisement in a magazine? Let me guess: never, right? You're not alone. Although I do not set myself up as an advertising guru, I worked in advertising for many years, and I never heard of a book ad that brought in much revenue. Yes, the ad may get the book some recognition, so that when potential buyers later see the book in a store, they may be influenced to buy it, but few people pick up the phone or go to a computer to order a book from an ad, especially an ad for a poetry book.

Who is most likely to buy a poetry book? Someone who has heard that poet's work. Where can potential buyers hear a poet's work? At gatherings for writers, of course. For that reason, my number-one suggestion is to use your time and money getting booked to speak at venues where you can read your poetry and sell your books face-to-face.

Q: Why is it considered poor English usage to begin a sentence with a gerund?

A: If by "poor" you mean incorrect, it's not consistently true, although it can happen, and if by "poor" you mean "weak," it can be true, but again, not necessarily. To say using a gerund at the beginning of a sentence is always poor, weak, or incorrect is an overgeneralization. Once I explain the problems a gerund at the beginning of a sentence can cause, however, you will see why smart writers avoid them.

Gerunds--verbs turned into nouns by adding ing, such as laughing, cooking, and walking--are common and proper English. That said, -ing formations often weaken writing when they call for passive verbs to drive the sentence. For example: Hanging from the rafters, the bats were upside down. "Were" is an inactive verb that shows no action. Recast the sentence, and see what you get: The bats hung upside down from the rafters. "Hung" is a

stronger verb than "was," because readers can visualize "hung," and it shows action, even if not much, and therefore it is a stronger verb than "was."

Worse than weak writing, though, are dangling modifiers, and gerunds, especially at the beginning of a phrase or a sentence, often act as the culprits in dangling modifiers.

Let's examine, for example, the following sentence: Waving good-bye, the boat pulled away, while we watched the shore fade in the distance. As written, the boat waved good-bye, because the word "waving" refers to the next noun, the boat. That example is typical of a dangling modifier created by beginning the sentence with a gerund. If you want to keep the gerund in the beginning, you could rewrite the sentence this way: Waving good-bye, we watched the shore fade in the distance while the boat pulled away. In the recast form, the word "waving" refers to "we," which is correct.

Another way that gerunds result in weak writing is that many writers get into a pattern of overusing them, especially at the beginnings of sentences. Strong writers, however, avoid overusing any structure.

Q: Which is correct? "Neither of us rides (or ride) the bus."

A: When saying something negative that applies to each of two people, the word "neither" calls for a singular verb: "Neither of us rides the bus."

Bobbie Christmas, book editor, author of Write In Style (Union Square Publishing), and owner of Zebra Communications, will answer your questions, too. Send them to Bobbie@zebraeditor.com. Read more "Ask the Book Doctor" questions and answers at www.zebracommunications.com.