A participle is a verb in disguise. It’s actually a nonfinite verb that functions as an adjective. Participles make action indirect, even vague. Used badly, they can make the actors in a poem—the people, the I—disappear. You can usually spot participles by their endings, -ing or -ed, and where they come in a line: at the beginning and often as a substitute for a noun or pronoun, especially I.

They look like verbs, but they work like adjectives, as words that describe nouns or pronouns.

For example,
• “Walking in the rain and feeling its caress”—participle creep!
• “I walked in the rain and felt its caress”—the I is back and strong!

Avoid Participle Creep in Your Poems
**Two Examples**

**Poem with Participles and Poem without Participles**

**Green Thoughts With Participles**
Perched on a tree stump, trying to admire the walnut woods.

Looking at Norman’s pond, a film of algae like a crust of emeralds.

Watching the walnuts thud into the earth.

Smelling the skunk musk from last night’s visit so close to the dog, noticing the half-eaten rat, the buzz of three flies.

**Green Thoughts**
I perch on a tree stump and try to admire the walnut woods.

Below me Norman’s pond, a film of algae like a crust of emeralds just out of my reach.

Beside me a walnut thuds into the earth and digs itself a nest to wait its birth.

I taste last night’s skunk musk and wonder if tomato juice cleans away the stink.

The cat found the rat I saw in the barn, and has left the bottom half near the stump as a gift for scavengers hungrier than I.

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**Remember to stick with the “I” in your poems. It will almost always make a stronger, more personal poem.**

**Participles distance us as readers from direct experience.**

**The participle will eat your “I” if you let it. Your voice will disappear, and your readers will miss your voice.**

**Keep the human presence in the poem.**