



# IIT Madras

ONLINE DEGREE

**English – 1 (Basic English)**  
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**Lecture 19**  
**Words and Phrases in English**

Welcome to the class. Today, we are going to talk about phrases in English sentences. The main point is to look at phrases. You must have heard this word; we want you to understand what a phrase is, how it is made of, and what is its role in language and how do we learn about it? What do we pay attention to understand phrases? These are some of the things that we will discuss. Let's begin.

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The slide is titled "Determiners and Nouns" and features a large, faint watermark of the IIT Madras logo in the background. The slide content includes a list of examples and handwritten annotations:

- articles** (handwritten in red)
- Determiners and Nouns** (title)
- Def** (handwritten in red, next to "The postman")
- Indef** (handwritten in red, next to "A policeman", "An architect", "A boy", "The boy", "A man", "An hour")
- [Det + N]** (handwritten in red, next to "The postman")
- the - Def** (handwritten in red, next to "The postman")
- g c** (handwritten in red, next to "The postman")
- gh v** (handwritten in red, next to "The postman")
- cv cv** (handwritten in red, next to "The postman")

The list of examples on the slide is:

- The postman
- A policeman
- An architect
- A boy
- The boy
- A man
- An hour

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We have been looking at words; we have also looked at what makes a word, to do that we looked at sounds. So, we saw that a particular combination of sounds in certain constraint ways makes a word. In the process, it also makes a syllable. So, while paying attention to these subtle details in the process of learning language, we learnt that a word is not a random collection of sounds.

We know, there are very few numbers of sounds available in any language. For example, in English, we have 44 sounds; we have 20 vowel sounds and 24 consonant sounds. So, all these 44 sounds are responsible for making millions of words. We say millions because we do not know the total number of words in English or for that matter, we do not know a total number of words in any language. So, we say, for all possible words of the languages, only these 44 sounds are responsible.

So, we put these sounds in certain orders, and we make a word, but that order is also a constraint, we have noted these details. We have looked at how consonants and vowels come together, what is the constraint in cluster formation, how we make a cluster with two consonants and how we make a cluster with three consonants. So, we have seen several aspects of sounds and words, and by now I need to underline this one more time that, paying attention to these subtle elements in language helps us learn, improve our speaking.

By now, I can confidently underline this part that when you look at stress patterns, you need to know about syllables, i.e., we need to understand syllabification in a word. We need to know that words have various syllables. When we want to understand how initial sounds are aspirated, again at this point, we need to know syllables because such aspiration occurs at a syllable-initial position.

So, for understanding right stress, i.e., which syllable is stressed and which syllables are not stressed, we need to understand stress patterns, we need to understand syllabification, we need to understand the arrangement of sounds in a word, and then we need to understand the feature of those sounds. Such things make us confident about words; such things help us become confident in speaking these words and sound impressive.

To continue this, I want you to look at phrases, i.e., when more than one word comes together before it can make a sentence, it makes a phrase. And in that process, a word is also a phrase by itself. What does it mean? And how does it work? Let us look at some of these examples that are there on your screen. When we say elements like the postman, a policeman, an architect or a boy or the boy, a man, an hour, we need to see that there are at least two words in this combination, i.e., 'the' and 'postman.' But this element 'the' has something to do with 'postman,' i.e., the word postman.

So, what is the combination? How are they related? And what is going on in this? If we need to identify these elements, we identify postman is a noun, and we identify this element as a determiner. So, this is a sequence of a determiner plus a noun. And so is this sequence, this phrase, this combination of determiner and noun gives you all of them, i.e., all these phrases. We will have a full-length discussion on determiners in English separately. However, since we have mentioned these things, I need to add a note on determiners.

In our languages, we do not have determiners as a category, i.e., we have 'a' and 'an' on one side, plus 'the' on the other side as determiners in English. This is called definite determiner, and these two are called indefinite determiners. This comes before a word which begins with

a consonant sounds because 'a' itself is a vowel sound, so it comes before a word that begins with consonants, and for a word that begins with a vowel sounds, we get 'an' because it gives us alternation of CVCV.

Check it one more time; this determiner before a vowel sound so it is vowel and consonant. This one, right before a word where the initial sound is a vowel to make consonant, vowel, consonant, vowel for us to get this alternation we have these two but these two determiners. But both of them are indefinite determiners, and this is a definite determiner. We will have another discussion on determiners some other time.

Since we mention the word, we wanted to add this much so that you know determiner as a class of words like nouns. So, this is also one of the identifying element for nouns. We can say very confidently that determiners only precede a noun phrase. You will get to see this thing more significantly when we have completed our discussion on phrases. For the time being, we can also say determiners precede only a noun in English.

More accurately, we need to say a determiner precedes a noun phrase. It is a defining element for us to identify a noun phrase. It is an identifying feature for a noun phrase. So, when it precedes, it is there the following word must be a noun or a noun phrase. So, there is no doubt about that. At the same time, we can also say the same thing in different words that what precedes, what comes as an element making a noun definite or indefinite, identifying a noun definite or indefinite can only be determiners. These things are also called articles.

So, the postman, a policeman, an architect these are the words. These are phrases, not words. Because there are two words, but since determiners, so, when we say the postman, we are talking about definiteness, i.e., the information about the postman is shared between the speaker and the hearer. So, when I say the postman, I mean that I am talking about the postman that both of us know; when we say 'a postman', it means any postman. So, that is about definite and indefinite determiners, but together they make a phrase.

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## Adjectives and nouns

- Big box
- Brown monkey
- Thick book
- Nice person
- Pretty girl
- Good guy



So, let us move on further to see. Even adjectives when they are combined with nouns, make a phrase. So, we can say things like big box; this is an adjective which is modifying a noun, meaning giving us more information about noun. What is the information? It is adding; it is talking about some quality, some specification of the noun; in this case, it is talking about the size of the box. Brown monkey, in this case, this adjective is talking about the colour of this monkey. Thick book, in this case, the adjective thick is talking about the size of the book.

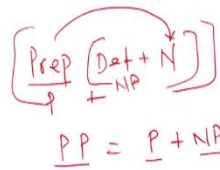
Nice person, quality of the person. Pretty girl, again quality of a girl. Good guy, quality of a guy. So, adjectives also add some information about nouns, and they make a phrase; so this is also a phrase. So, as of now, we can simply say whenever two elements combine, where one element gives more information about the other one, together they make a phrase. We can say this much.

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## Preposition and nouns

- On the table
- In the classroom
- About a book
- In an empty box
- In a big brown empty box



Then, when we move forward, we see other elements coming into play and giving us a combination of words which amount to a unit, i.e., the combination amounts to the formation of a unit. How does it work? Look at this, in a phrase like this 'on the table'; we have three elements, where 'on' is a preposition. Then we have a determiner, and then we have a noun.

So, first, these two make a phrase by itself. In this case, the table and then preposition comes right before this, which is talking about something which also has to do with the table. Therefore, these three things together make one phrase. So, as of now, determiners and noun were making a noun phrase, and this noun phrase and preposition are together making a prepositional phrase which is a prepositional phrase.

The prepositional phrase has two elements, one preposition and the other is a noun phrase, and that is how we see elements combining to make a bigger chunk. And this chunk is what we know is a phrase. Now, the point to notice and underline for our understanding is, these are different categories of words, but when they combine, they do not remain indifferent from one another. There is a way in which they form a unit, chunk.

You can observe the same thing in each one of these phrases. Look at this, 'the classroom here', again a determiner 'the' and the noun classroom is making a noun phrase, and when we say 'in the classroom', we are again talking about 'the classroom', so this becomes a prepositional phrase. 'About a book' is another prepositional phrase. 'In an empty box', here, first, an adjective and noun make a phrase, then, this determiners comes to combine them as



one noun phrase. Understand? This must be a noun phrase because a determiner precedes it and then comes a preposition. Then we understand this is a prepositional phrase.

So, in this prepositional phrase again, we have a noun phrase, then we have another noun phrase, and then it makes a prepositional phrase. When we say 'in a big brown empty box', this is a still one big phrase where we have two adjectives talking about the same noun which makes us understand that we can have more than one adjectives modifying the same noun and still coming to make one unit.

So, here we have three adjectives modifying, describing one noun box. Then this determiner comes in front of all of them to indicate the whole chunk is a noun phrase and then there is a preposition telling you this is a prepositional phrase. Thus, we see, the size of a phrase may increase, may become bigger, but there is a rational, there is a pattern which follows to make a phrase.

So, all these things remain a phrase, and they do not get this status of a sentence. Therefore, we can say at this stage that a sentence is not just a combination of words; actually, what we mean by a combination of words is a phrase. So, several words together to be more precise, several categories together, and then we get words from those categories to make a phrase. This is how we understand the significance and the formation of a phrase in a language like English.

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### Phrases

- The student of English
- Students from Chennai
- The student of English from Chennai
- \* The student from Chennai of English
- The student of English from Chennai in long hair

the student of English with long hair from Chennai



Now, to observe a little bit more about the phrase, to understand more about the phrase, let us look at these examples. What do these examples tell us? Here, the first one is the student of

English. In the first glance, you would agree that this is a phrase and not a sentence. But when we look at it very closely, we see, what is the nucleus of this phrase. Understand every phrase will have a nucleus, so the nucleus of this phrase is this student. There is another noun in this phrase which is English.

So, this noun and this preposition of English, they make one phrase together. First, let us say the prepositional phrase 'of English' and, this prepositional phrase is part of the bigger noun phrase. 'Student' because this prepositional phrase tells us something about this 'student', i.e., this is how we understand 'student of English', meaning, this student who studies English. And then you have a determiner here indicating that this whole thing is a noun phrase.

Look at it; we can say 'students from Chennai.' We see here that 'from Chennai' is again a prepositional phrase, and this thing tells us something about this noun 'students.' The 'student of English from Chennai', look at this chunk now. Here, we have two prepositional phrases; 'from Chennai' and 'of English.' We can say this as, one, and this as two. Both of them giving us information about this student, which is the nucleus of this big phrase and then this determiner coming in front of this whole chunk tells us that this is a noun phrase.

The whole thing is a noun phrase, i.e., 'the student of English from Chennai' is a noun phrase which has two prepositional phrases in it. We have started noticing something very important, and this must attract our attention. We can say 'the student of English from Chennai', but we cannot say in English 'the student from Chennai of English.' There is a star here at the beginning of the sentence. This tells you this sequence is not just unacceptable; it is ungrammatical because this is not a desirable sequence.

Now, what this ungrammaticality and unacceptability mean to us? So, what is the difference between the previous chunk, let us call it A and the second one B. So, what is the difference between A and B? The only difference is we have two prepositional phrases; 1 and 2. In the second one, we have reversed the order 2 and 1.

So, what we can say is, this prepositional phrase which we are indicating as 1 here, must be close to this noun 'student.' It must remain close to this noun 'student' to keep the chunk grammatically acceptable. So, again when we put this back, we can say 'the student of English from Chennai' in long here. It sounds better if you say a bit long here. So, if we say 'the student of English from Chennai with long hair' this sequence is acceptable.



So, here, this remains close to this one, and then you have 'from Chennai with long hair.' So, here you have 1, 2, 3 prepositional phrases. This is perfectly fine, and still, this whole chunk is a big noun phrase because it is preceded by the determiner. But keep in mind, we can change the sequence of 2 and 3 as PP; we can say 'the student of English with long hair from Chennai.' So, we can say 'the student of English with long hair from Chennai.' This is perfect; there is no problem in this sequence.

So, if we reverse the order of 3 and 2, there is no problem, but the order of 1 must not be disrupted. It must remain as one, must remain close to the nucleus that is the student. So, now we start noticing something very interesting in the sequence of words in a bigger phrase.

So, first, we notice that two words from two different categories together made a phrase. Then we see, two phrases together also or more than two phrases can also make one phrase, i.e., 'of English' is one phrase and 'the student of English' it is one big phrase, but it has another phrase inside it.

We see, 'the student of English from Chennai', it is one big phrase, noun phrase but we find, there are two smaller prepositional phrases within this bigger phrase. Then we see, there could be three prepositional phrases also in one big noun phrase, and then we see that we have something like 'the student of English from Chennai with long hair.' Very nice, no problem. But, right before that, we saw that there is something else emerging out of it that among two. There are two prepositional phrases we see, the sequence of the two matters, i.e., we have just seen that in examples A and B, we cannot reverse the sequence of these two prepositional phrases which are marked as 1 and 2. We cannot write them 2 and 1 because it becomes an ungrammatical sequence. We see in the larger phrase when we have three prepositional phrases as still 1 that is 1 must remain close to student. But we see that when we reverse the sequence of 2 and 3, it does not make a difference.

So, noticing these patterns help us understand not just the sequence but the patterning of elements in a phrase for grammaticality and acceptability. This is important for us to pay attention to. So, what is responsible for this? Why is this sequence important? This is what we need to understand. So, we do not need to get into jargons; we do not need to get into too many words. All we can say is, to understand the notion of phrase in English, even one word can be a phrase. When two words from two different categories come together, that also makes a phrase.

A phrase can also be part of another bigger phrase. There can be more than two phrases, two or more than two phrases inside a phrase. All these things are important, and then we see sometimes the sequence of these phrases also matter and sometimes sequence does not matter. So, the sequence of these elements is also important. So, what is required remains close to the nucleus of the bigger noun phrase and the required element is called the complement of the noun and the two other prepositional phrase which can change the sequence, they are called adjuncts.

We will discuss those things later to understand them in a different context as well, but at this time, if you just pay attention to these elements, you will understand the significance of a phrase and the making of a phrase for our understanding. This will also be a foundation for us to understand how words play a role in making a sentence. And this is how incrementally we build a sequence which is called a sentence.

So, we will continue looking at this; at this point, I want you to write several words to see; you can also write a sentence. You do not need to wait for us to start a discussion on sentence. And then you can start looking at the difference between these kinds of the sequence of words which are phrases and a sentence. What is the difference between the two? Why are these things, not sentences? Why do we call them phrases? What is the difference between the sentence and a phrase?

And when some words are together, how are they, how are they making a phrase? Work on this exercise, take any chunk of a spoken or written language and identify these elements for yourself that will work as a foundation for your understanding of these sequences, smaller chunks, bigger chunks in the language. We will come back with something else for you. Until then, thank you so much.