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Grammar Course for Second Year Students

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Second Semester: An Introduction to Phrases

Definition: Phrases are groups of related words that do not contain both a subject and a verb. They act as parts of speech within sentences. In other words, phrases are groups of words that serve as nouns, verbs, adjectives or adverbs in sentences. Here are two examples of phrases:

- After lunch
- After slithering down the stairs and across the road to scare nearly to death Mrs. Philpot busy pruning her rose bushes

Whereas clauses are larger units that usually contain at least a subject and a verb, phrases are smaller parts of the sentence. Sometimes they are essential to the structure of a clause (e.g., a noun phrase that functions as the subject), and sometimes they just provide some extra information (most prepositional phrases).

As we review the different types of phrases, we note that one phrase can include another. For example, we can categorize *swimming in the ocean* as a participial phrase (*swimming* is a present participle), even though it includes a prepositional phrase (*in the ocean*).

Types of Phrases and their Functions: All phrases have what is called head or head word. This is the word within the phrase that determines its grammatical function (and which acts to provide its most general meaning); other words within the phrase act in a modifying capacity. Phrases then have specific types based on the head word: prepositional phrase, infinitive phrase, participle phrase, gerund phrase, appositive, and absolute phrase.

Gerund Phrases

Definition: A gerund is a type of verbal that ends in *-ing*. It is a verb form that is used as a noun. A gerund may function as a subject, an object of a verb, or the object of a preposition.

Eg.: *Maria made us laugh by packing for the vacation two weeks in advance.*

A gerund phrase includes a gerund and any complements and modifiers needed to complete its meaning.

Eg.: The headmaster forbade eating anywhere in the school yard.

A gerund phrase as well functions as a noun, and it occupies some of the same positions in a sentence that a noun does: *subject, direct object, object of the preposition, and complement.*

Gerunds

function of the gerund

- | | |
|---|--------------------------------|
| (4) <i>Studying</i> is hard work. | subject |
| (5) Some students enjoy <i>studying</i> . | object |
| (6) Nothing stops Lucy from <i>studying</i> . | object of the preposition from |
| (7) Lucy's favorite activity is <i>studying</i> . | subject complement |

In Sentences (4) through (7) we see the different uses of *studying* as a gerund:

- In Sentence (4), Studying is the subject of the verb *is*. Because Studying functions as a non-countable noun, it is followed by the singular verb *is*.
- In Sentence (5), studying is the object of the verb *enjoy*, a verb that is followed by a gerund form of another verb.
- In Sentence (6), studying is the object of the preposition *from*.
- In Sentence (7), studying is a subject complement because it is renaming or identifying the subject of the verb. Studying tells us what Lucy's favorite activity is.

The sentences below are identical to the ones above with one exception. Instead of using simple gerunds, each sentence now includes a gerund phrase.

Gerund Phrases

function of the gerund phrase

- | | |
|--|--------------------------------|
| (4a) <i>Studying English grammar</i> requires patience. | subject |
| (5a) Everyone enjoys <i>studying English grammar</i> . | object |
| (6a) Nothing stops Lucy from <i>studying English grammar</i> . | object of the preposition from |
| (7a) Lucy's favorite activity is <i>studying English grammar</i> . | subject complement |

Negating Gerunds

Gerunds are often used negatively. Both gerunds and gerund phrases are made negative by the addition of *not* before the verbal:

- (8) *Not studying* can be a problem.
- (9) *Not studying* English grammar can be a problem.

Practice

1/ **Underline the gerunds or gerund phrases in each sentence.**

1. Logging is the process of harvesting trees and delivering them to manufacturing facilities.
2. Writing papers for English is something Jay enjoys.
3. Charlie complained of hearing noises outside.
4. My sister and I helped mom with her fall planting.
5. Doctors are constantly finding new cures for diseases.
6. Flying is our first choice of vacation transportation.
7. I told Laura that she should consider acting as a career.

8. Mrs. Baker's unique teaching made her class popular.
9. Being in enclosed places makes Tonya nervous.
10. My brother plans on returning home after a year in Spain.
11. Dividing the chores made life easier at our house.
12. After waiting for an hour, we gave up and went home.
13. Coloring is a popular activity with most children.
14. We enjoyed seeing videotapes of our childhood.
15. Carmen would like to try skydiving

2/ Consider the sentences below, and tell whether the –ing form is a gerund or a part of a progressive verb phrase.

1. Her sole occupation was writing short stories.
2. Their grandmother was vacationing in Florida when the storm hit.
3. The club is holding a social next month.
4. To be a dedicated teacher is a special calling.
5. The long trip with her young children was driving her crazy.
6. Joseph's hobby is rebuilding antique cars.

3/ In each sentence, underline the gerund or gerund phrase, and find out its function:

1. Calling is the best choice.
2. David gives racing most of his time.
3. George lightened the mood by whistling.
4. Olivia devotes her time to helping others.
5. Omar and Brian are responsible for training their dogs.
6. Catching a big fish made the day at the lake worthwhile.
7. The ancients had no way of knowing the weather ahead of time.
8. Mother was against celebrating her birthday.
9. Living in the Middle East for a year was an adventure for the whole family.
10. Mining coal was my grandfather's job as a young man.
11. Brushing regularly protected me from cavities.
12. Kirsten devoted a week to preparing for the final exam.
13. Despite her injury, Diana still likes skating.
14. Listening is important in following directions.
15. His interest in wrestling began at an early age.
16. Zack is good at conveying his point to others.
17. The actors in the play were busy with learning their lines.

18. Gaining the trust of his friends is important to Len.
19. Meagan took pride in designing the homecoming float.
20. Watching television has never interested Mia.

Participles and Participial Phrases

1/ Introduction

A participle is a verbal that is used as an adjective and most often ends in *-ing* or *-ed*. The term *verbal* indicates that a participle, like the other two kinds of verbals, is based on a verb and therefore expresses an action or a state of being. However, since they function as adjectives, participles modify nouns or pronouns.

There are two types of participles: present participles and past participles. Present participles end in *-ing*, and past participles end in *-ed*, *-en*, *-d*, *-t*, *-n*, or *-ne* as in the words *asked*, *eaten*, *saved*, *dealt*, *seen*, and *gone* (it depends on the irregular verb).

- The *crying* baby had a wet diaper.
- *Shaken*, he walked away from the *wrecked* car.
- The *burning* log fell off the fire.
- *Smiling*, she hugged the *panting* dog.

2/ Definition

A participial phrase is a group of words consisting of a participle and the modifier(s) and/or (pro) noun (s) or noun phrase(s) that function as the direct object(s), indirect object(s), or complement(s) of the action or state expressed in the participle, such as:

- **Throwing his jacket**, Tom rushed to the river.

The participial phrase functions as an adjective modifying *Tom*.

Throwing (participle) his jacket (direct object of action expressed in participle)

- Anna noticed her brother **walking along the shoreline**.

The participial phrase functions as an adjective modifying *brother*.

walking (participle)

along the shoreline (prepositional phrase as adverb)

- Children **interested in music early** develop strong intellectual skills.

The participial phrase functions as an adjective modifying *children*.

interested (in) (participle)

music (direct object of action expressed in participle)

early (adverb)

- **Having been a gymnast, Lori knew the importance of exercise.**

The participial phrase functions as an adjective modifying *Lori*.

Having been (participle)

a gymnast (subject complement for Lori, via state of being expressed in participle)

3/ Placement

In order to prevent confusion, a participial phrase must be placed as close to the noun it modifies as possible, and the noun must be clearly stated.

- *Carrying a heavy pile of books*, his foot caught on a step. *
- *Carrying a heavy pile of books*, he caught his foot on a step.

In the first sentence, there is no clear indication of who or what is performing the action expressed in the participle carrying. Certainly, foot can't be logically understood to function in this way. This situation is an example of a **dangling modifier** error, since the modifier (the participial phrase) is not modifying any specific noun in the sentence and is thus left "dangling." Since a person must be doing the carrying for the sentence to make sense, a noun or pronoun that refers to a person must be in the place immediately after the participial phrase, as in the second sentence.

4/ Punctuation

When a participial phrase begins a sentence, a comma should be placed after the phrase.

- *Arriving at the store*, I found that it was closed.
- *Washing and polishing the car*, Frank developed sore muscles.

If the participle or participial phrase comes in the middle of a sentence, it should be set off with commas only if the information is not essential to the meaning of the sentence.

- Sid, *watching an old movie*, drifted in and out of sleep.
- The church, *destroyed by a fire*, was never rebuilt.

Note that if the participial phrase is essential to the meaning of the sentence, no commas should be used:

- The student *earning the highest grade point average* will receive a special award.
- The guy *wearing the chicken costume* is my cousin.

If a participial phrase comes at the end of a sentence, a comma usually precedes the phrase if it modifies an earlier word in the sentence but not if the phrase directly follows the word it modifies.

- The local residents often saw Ken wandering through the streets.
(The phrase modifies *Ken*, not *residents*.)
- Tom nervously watched the woman, alarmed by her silence.

(The phrase modifies *Tom*, not *woman*.)

Practice

1/ Write two sentences using each of the following words. In the first sentence use the word as the main verb. In the second sentence use the word as a participle.

1. shaking

a.

b.

2. painted

a.

b.

3. leaping

a.

b.

2/ Draw a line under the participle or participial phrase in each sentence.

1. The winding road led to a large house on a hill.
2. Knowing the answer, I raised my hand.
3. Alonzo's shaking hands gave away the fact that he was nervous.
4. Guided by a strong sense of direction, I found my way out of the forest.
5. The locked cage contained a Bengal tiger.
6. Playing major league hockey, Rafael fulfilled his dream.
7. We see Jenny racing to the curb for the mail every day.
8. Having discussed the matter at length, my father took the job out of state.
9. Paying attention, I heard a lovely ringing in the distant bell tower.
10. Disappointed by the loss, the fans quietly left the stadium.
11. We saw Junko courteously thanking everyone.
12. I listened to the willow's sad, creaking branches.
13. Finding the assignments difficult, Isra sought help from a tutor.
14. During the performance everyone could probably hear my pounding heart.
15. Having done my homework, I left for hockey practice.
16. Valerie finds her after-school job challenging.
17. The winning steer at the fair came from Springfield.
18. The sad film left many moviegoers sobbing gently.
19. Startled by the noise, we jumped from our chairs.
20. Protected by his seat belt, Sean walked away from the accident.

3/ Underline each participle or participial phrase and draw an arrow to the noun or pronoun it modifies.

1. Having concluded my speech, I stepped away from the podium.
2. Dressed as a pirate, my little brother had a cardboard sword.
3. The runners, tired from the race, rest on a nearby bench.
4. Having received her letter, I wrote back right away.
5. Searching the room for my jacket, I found my hat instead.
6. Tracked by the hunters, the deer ran swiftly.
7. Those arriving after the bell will be marked tardy.
8. The city's authorities felt a growing concern about the high crime rate.
9. Everyone came to the pep rally wearing the school colors.
10. That juice, derived from the leaves of the aloe plant, is used to treat burns.
11. Disturbed by the lack of cooperation, the coach dismissed us early.
12. Rescued by the firefighters, the kitten was shaking.
13. Promising he'd be home on time, Jeff left for the movies.
14. The insects, attracted by the food, ruined our picnic.
15. Yelling from across the field, Russ reminded us to bring our uniforms.
16. The tin can uncovered by my metal detector was worthless.
17. We chose the line by the field house as our starting point.
18. Covered with ice and snow, the car would not start.
19. Ty was confused by the note lying on the counter.
20. The dripping faucet got on everyone's nerves.

Infinitive Phrases

1/ Definition

An infinitive is a verbal consisting of the word *to* plus a verb (in its simplest "stem" form) and functioning as a noun, adjective, or adverb. The term *verbal* indicates that an infinitive, like the other two kinds of verbals, is based on a verb and therefore expresses action or a state of being. However, the infinitive may function as a subject, direct object, subject complement, adjective, or adverb in a sentence. Although an infinitive is easy to locate because of the *to* + verb form, deciding what function it has in a sentence can sometimes be confusing.

- *To wait* seemed foolish when decisive action was required. (subject)
- Everyone wanted *to go*. (direct object)
- His ambition is *to fly*. (subject complement)
- He lacked the strength *to resist*. (adjective)

- We must study *to learn*. (adverb)

Be sure not to confuse an infinitive—a verbal consisting of to plus a verb—with a prepositional phrase beginning with to, which consists of to plus a noun or pronoun and any modifiers.

- **Infinitives:** to fly, to draw, to become, to enter, to stand, to catch, to belong
- **Prepositional Phrases:** to him, to the committee, to my house, to the mountains, to us, to this address

2/ Function

An Infinitive Phrase is a group of words consisting of an infinitive and the modifier(s) and/or (pro)noun(s) or noun phrase(s) that function as the actor(s), direct object(s), or complement(s) of the action or state expressed in the infinitive, such as:

- We intended **to leave early**.

The infinitive phrase functions as the direct object of the verb *intended*.
to leave (infinitive)
early (adverb)

- I have a paper **to write before class**.

The infinitive phrase functions as an adjective modifying *paper*.
to write (infinitive)
before class (prepositional phrase as adverb)

- Phil agreed **to give me a ride**.

The infinitive phrase functions as the direct object of the verb *agreed*.
to give (infinitive)
me (indirect object of action expressed in infinitive)
a ride (direct object of action expressed in infinitive)

- They asked **me to bring some food**.

The infinitive phrase functions as the direct object of the verb *asked*.
me (actor or "subject" of infinitive phrase)
to bring (infinitive)
some food (direct object of action expressed in infinitive)

- Everyone wanted **Carol to be the captain of the team**.

The infinitive phrase functions as the direct object of the verb *wanted*.
Carol (actor or "subject" of infinitive phrase)
to be (infinitive)

the captain (subject complement for Carol, via state of being expressed in infinitive)
of the team (prepositional phrase as adjective)

Practice

1/ Circle the infinitive or infinitive phrase in each sentence.

1. With her father in the military, Charlotte learned to adjust to new situations.
2. Rudy learned to ride a bike when he was very young.
3. Pedro refused to play by our rules.
4. Sharon's understudy was prepared to take her place in the play.
5. To save time in the mornings, Danny laid his clothes out each night.
6. Nicky hoped to learn French to study abroad.
7. Mother tried to limit the amount of fat in our meals.
8. Winter is the best time for some families to go on vacation.
9. Gabe's dream is to become a lawyer.
10. Joel was eager to save money for a new stereo.
11. Dan always tries to remain calm in emergencies.
12. We decided to order a pizza.
13. Several police officers were dispatched to control the traffic flow.
14. I was happy to help Dad wash the car.
15. To act on Broadway is Chip's wish.
16. We walked several blocks until we found something to eat.
17. Sheila always tries to be prepared for class.
18. It was difficult to identify the type of bacteria under the microscope.
19. Kim was anxious to leave for the concert.
20. It was fun to learn stained glass technique.

Infinitive Phrases (cont.)

1/ Actors

The actor of the infinitive phrase could be roughly characterized as the "subject" of the action or state expressed in the infinitive. It is somewhat misleading to use the word *subject*, however, since an infinitive phrase is not a full clause with a subject and a finite verb. Also notice that when it is a pronoun, the actor appears in the objective case (*me*, not *I*, in the fourth example). Certain verbs, when they take an infinitive direct object, require an actor for the infinitive phrase; others can't have an actor. Still other verbs can go either way, as the charts below illustrate.

Verbs that take infinitive objects without actors:

Agree	begin	Continue	Decide
fail	hesitate	Hope	Intend
learn	neglect	Offer	Plan
prefer	pretend	Promise	Refuse
remember	start	Try	

Examples:

- Most students *plan* to study.
- We *began* to learn.
- They *offered* to pay.
- They *neglected* to pay.
- She *promised* to return.

In all of these examples no actor can come between the italicized main (finite) verb and the infinitive direct-object phrase.

Verbs that take infinitive objects with actors:

advise	Allow	Convince	Remind
encourage	Force	Hire	Teach
instruct	Invite	Permit	Tell
implore	Incite	Appoint	Order

Examples:

- He *reminded* me to buy milk.
- Their fathers *advise* them to study.
- She *forced* the defendant to admit the truth.
- You've *convinced* the director of the program to change her position.
- I *invite* you to consider the evidence.

In all of these examples an actor is required after the italicized main (finite) verb and before the infinitive direct-object phrase.

Verbs that use either pattern:

ask	expect	(would) like	want	need
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Examples:

- I *asked* to see the records.
- I *asked* him to show me the records.
- Trent *expected* his group to win.
- Trent *expected* to win.

- Brenda *likes* to drive fast.
- Brenda *likes* her friend to drive fast.

In all of these examples the italicized main verb can take an infinitive object with or without an actor.

4/ Punctuation

If the infinitive is used as an adverb and is the beginning phrase in a sentence, it should be set off with a comma; otherwise, no punctuation is needed for an infinitive phrase.

- *To buy a basket of flowers*, John had to spend his last dollar.
- *To improve your writing*, you must consider your purpose and audience.

Summary

1. *An infinitive is a verbal consisting of the word to plus a verb; it may be used as a noun, adjective, or adverb.*
2. *An infinitive phrase consists of an infinitive plus modifier(s), object(s), complement(s), and/or actor(s).*
3. *An infinitive phrase requires a comma only if it is used as an adverb at the beginning of a sentence.*

5/ Split Infinitives

Split infinitives occur when additional words are included between **to** and **the verb** in an infinitive. Many readers find a single adverb splitting the infinitive to be acceptable, but this practice should be avoided in formal writing.

Examples:

- I like *to* on a nice day *walk* in the woods. * (unacceptable)
On a nice day, I like *to walk* in the woods. (revised)
- I needed *to* quickly *gather* my personal possessions. (acceptable in informal contexts)
I needed *to gather* my personal possessions quickly. (revised for formal contexts)

Comparing Gerunds, Participles, and Infinitives

1/ Comparing Gerunds and Participles

Look at the pair of sentences below. In the first sentence, the use of a gerund (functioning as a noun) allows the meaning to be expressed more precisely than in the second. In the first sentence, the interrupting, a specific behavior is precisely indicated as the cause of the speaker's irritation. In the second, the cause of the irritation is identified less precisely as Jack, who just happens to have been interrupting. (In the second sentence, interrupting is actually a participle, not a gerund, since it functions as an adjective modifying Jack.)

- I was irritated by Jack's constant interrupting.

- I was irritated by Jack, constantly interrupting.

The same pattern is shown in these other example pairs below: in the first of each pair, a gerund (noun-function) is used; in the second, a participle (adjective-function). Notice the subtle change in meaning between the two sentences in each pair.

Examples:

- The guitarist's finger-picking was extraordinary.
(The *technique* was extraordinary.)
- The guitarist, finger-picking, was extraordinary.
(The *person* was extraordinary, demonstrating the technique.)
- He was not impressed with their competing.
(The *competing* did not impress him.)
- He was not impressed with them competing.
(*They* did not impress him as they competed.)
- Grandpa enjoyed his grandchildren's running and laughing.
Grandpa enjoyed his grandchildren, running and laughing.* (Ambiguous: who is running and laughing?)

2/ Comparing Gerunds and Infinitives

The difference in the form of gerunds and infinitives is quite clear just from comparing the following lists:

- **Gerunds:** *swimming, hoping, telling, eating, dreaming*
- **Infinitives:** *to swim, to hope, to tell, to eat, to dream*

Their functions, however, overlap. Gerunds always function as nouns, but infinitives often also serve as nouns. Deciding which to use can be confusing in many situations, especially for people whose first language is not English.

Confusion between gerunds and infinitives occurs primarily in cases in which one or the other functions as the direct object in a sentence. In English, some verbs take gerunds as verbal direct objects exclusively while other verbs take only infinitives and still others can take either. Many such verbs are listed below, organized according to which kind of verbal direct object they take.

Verbs that take only infinitives as verbal direct objects

agree	Decide	Expect	hesitate
learn	Need	Promise	Neglect
hope	Want	Plan	Attempt

intend	Pretend
--------	---------

Examples:

- I hope *to go* on a vacation soon.
(**not:** I hope *going* on a vacation soon.*)
- He promised *to go* on a diet.
(**not:** He promised *going* on a diet. *)
- They agreed *to sign* the treaty.
(**not:** They agreed *signing* the treaty.*)
- Because she was nervous, she hesitated *to speak*.
(**not:** Because she was nervous, she hesitated *speaking*.)

Verbs that take only gerunds as verbal direct objects

Deny	risk	Delay	consider
can't help	keep	give up	be fond of
Finish	quit	put off	practice
Postpone	tolerate	Suggest	stop (quit)
Regret	enjoy	keep (on)	dislike
Admit	avoid	Recall	mind
miss	detest	Appreciate	recommend
get/be through	get/be tired of	get/be accustomed to	get/be used to

Examples:

- They always avoid *drinking* before driving.
(**not:** They always avoid *to drink* before driving.*)
- I recall *asking* her that question.
(**not:** I recall *to ask* her that question.*)
- She put off *buying* a new jacket.
(**not:** She put off *to buy* a new jacket.*)
- Mr. Allen enjoys *cooking*.
(**not:** Mr. Allen enjoys *to cook*.)

Verbs that take gerunds or infinitives as verbal direct objects

Start	begin	continue	hate
Prefer	like	Love	try
Remember			

Examples:

- She has continued *to work* at the store.
She has continued *working* at the store.
- They like *to go* to the movies.
They like *going* to the movies.
- Brent started *to walk* home.
Brent started *walking* home.

Sense verbs that take an object plus a gerund or a simple verb

Certain sense verbs take an object followed by either a gerund or a simple verb (infinitive form minus the word *to*). With many of the verbs that follow the object, the use of the gerund indicates continuous action while the use of the simple verb indicates a one-time action. Still, sometimes the simple verb can indicate continuous action if one-time action wouldn't make sense in the context.

feel	Hear	Notice	watch
see	Smell	Observe	

Examples:

- We watched him *playing* basketball. (continuous action)
We watched him *play* basketball. (continuous action)
- I felt my heart *pumping* vigorously. (continuous action)
I felt my heart *pump* vigorously. (continuous action)
- She saw them *jumping* on the bed. (continuous action)
She saw them *jump* on the bed. (one-time action)
- Tom heard the victim *shouting* for help. (continuous action)
Tom heard the victim *shout* for help. (one-time action)
- We could smell the pie *baking* in the kitchen. (continuous action)
We could smell the pie *bake* in the kitchen. (continuous action)

Sometimes the simple-verb version might seem unconventional, so it's safer in most cases to use the gerund version.

Practice

1/ Look at the following sentences and decide whether the underlined phrases are participial phrases or gerund phrases.

1. The candidate contested the outcome of the election, claiming voter fraud.
2. Working even after retirement age, George has been indispensable to the company.
3. You should consider doing your homework more carefully.

4. Exhausted by the climb, Taylor collapsed by the side of the road.
5. Taking a vacation is important for all of us.
6. Brenda, taking a deep breath, continued her talk.
7. Getting up early is hard when you're tired.
8. Concerned about the cost of gas, Geraldine decided to carpool.
9. People looking for a word's exact definition should consult a dictionary.
10. Elated with his grade report, Maurice sprinted home to tell his parents.
11. The wolverine, cornered by the bear, hissed and snapped its teeth.
12. The painting hanging in the hall is an original Picasso.

2/ Write P above each word or phrase in italics if it is a participle and G if it is a gerund.

1. *Exercising* is a good stress reliever.
2. Erin's hobby is *ballet dancing*.
3. We will try to cover much of the material, *depending on our time limitations*.
4. The class split into groups, *forming two lines*.
5. The small boy, *working diligently to stack the blocks*, was disappointed when they tumbled down.
6. My uncle enjoys *walking through the mall*.
7. *Sue's screaming* woke everyone in the house.
8. Our cabin did not have *running* water.
9. *Fearing I would miss the rehearsal*, I hurried to get ready.
10. Anna's job was *finding volunteers for the project*.
11. The teacher pointed to a slide *showing the single-celled bacteria*.
12. *Doing the errand* took more time than usual.
13. *Studying* is necessary for good grades.
14. The hero of the play proposed to the girl on *bended knee*.
15. Everyone was excited about *going to the party*.
16. The dishes, *broken during the tremor*, were irreparably damaged.
17. *Having written the letter*, I mailed it promptly.
18. *Working under a tight deadline*, we delivered the school paper to the printer on time.
19. Paul's company makes money by *exporting goods*.
20. My father hates to do the *shopping*.

Prepositional Phrases

1/ Definition

Prepositions draw a relationship between a noun or pronoun and another word in a sentence.

- They show place, position, time or method.
- The most common prepositions are the following:

aboard, about, above, across, after, against, along, amid, among, around, as, at, before, behind, below, beneath, beside, between, beyond, but, by, despite, down, during, except, for, from, in, inside, into, like, minus, near, of, off, on, onto, opposite, outside, over, past, per, through, to, toward, under, until, up, upon, versus, via, with.

2/ What are prepositional phrases?

Prepositional phrases are group of words that modify a noun or a verb. They cannot stand on their own as a complete thought, but they give us information about:

- where something happened: “They always saw each other at the park.”
- when it happened: “We need to finish our homework by noon.”
- help define a specific person or thing: “Mary is looking for a cat with white fur and blue eyes.”

Prepositional phrases provide important details about the words they modify in order to increase comprehension and clarity. They also answer the following questions:

- Which one?
- What kind?
- How?
- Where?
- When?
- To what extent?

The basic structure of a prepositional phrase is a preposition + its object/person. Prepositional phrases start with a preposition such as: about, after, at, before, behind, by, during, for, from, in, of, over, on, past, to, under, up, and with.

- All the seniors graduated with flying colors.

The most used prepositions in English are in, on, at.

These prepositions can be used in situations where their meaning is not literal.

In the following sentence, the preposition *on* describes something that is placed on a surface; however, its usage is metaphorical.

- Carla has a lot on her shoulders/mind.

3/ Functions of prepositional phrases

Prepositional phrases can function as an adjective or an adverb

Prepositional phrases as adjectives: When prepositional phrases function as an adjective, modifying a noun or a pronoun, they are called adjectival phrases as they function adjectivally. Examples:

- *They are writing a movie **about his life**.*

The prepositional phrase ‘about his life’ modifies the noun ‘movie’ and helps us to understand which movie the speaker is talking about writing. It is starting with the preposition ‘about’ and is followed by the object of the preposition his life.

- *I’m marrying the girl **of my dreams**.*

Which girl am I marrying? The girl of my dreams. The prepositional phrase ‘of my dreams’ is helping us to identify the girl the speaker is talking about.

- *The ending **of the movie** wasn’t good.*
- *The guy **in the red shirt** is my neighbor.*
- *The house **across the street** is believed to be haunted.*
- *Don’t open the letter **inside the box**; it’s personal.*
- *Students **from different countries** are studying in this college.*

Preposition phrases as adverbs: An adverb in English modifies a verb, an adjective, or another adverb; it gives us more information. When prepositional phrases function as an adverb, they are called adverbial phrases. Examples:

- *He lives **across the street**.*

Across the street is the prepositional phrase here that’s modifying the verb lives. It is telling us where he lives. So, it’s, rightfully, working as an adverb in the sentence. It has the preposition across and its object the street.

- *Looking **at the sun for long** can damage your eyes.*

At the sun for long modifies the verb looking, answering the question where. At is the preposition, the sun is the object of the preposition, and for long is another modifier.

- *The dog is hiding **under the table**.*

Under the table is the prepositional phrase that’s modifying the verb hiding and telling us about the place of the action.

- *His father sends him money **at the end of every month**.*

When does his father send him the money? At the end of every month is the prepositional phrase that’s answering that question, answering when. At is the preposition, the end is its

object, and of every month is another prepositional phrase that's modifying the object of the preposition the end. It is working as an adjective.

- You need to keep your money **in your pocket**.
- I would take you guys **to my dream place**.
- Everyone is getting crazy **during this lockdown period**.
- He jumped **off the building** and killed himself.

4/ Sentences with More than One Preposition

A sentence can have more than one prepositional phrase. They can be separated:

Example: *During Valentine's day, we went to the amusement park.* Or they can be followed by another prepositional phrase:

Example: *Mary Shelley started to write Frankenstein as part of a challenge with her husband and friends.*

Basic structure of a prepositional phrase is a preposition + an object/person. In a prepositional phrase, the preposition is followed by an object or person which can be a noun (N) or a pronoun (PN). Example:

"My mom always buys milk from the convenience store on Cruz Street (N)."

"I am convinced that she is going to the party with him (PN)."

5/ Placement in a Sentence

After the Main Clause: Prepositional phrases are often placed after the main clause (MC). The main clause is the part of a sentence that can "form a complete sentence standing alone having a subject and a predicate". Examples:

- *Madam Bovary is a well-known novel (MC) by the French writer Gustave Flaubert.*
- *All we have to decide is what to do (MC) with the time that is given us.*

At the Beginning: A prepositional phrase can be at the beginning of a sentence which serves as an introductory clause. In this case, it must be followed by a comma to separate it from the main clause:

• Examples:

- By the time Maria arrived, John was already there doing the dishes.
- Over the past few years, information has become easily accessible.
- After riding his bike around the neighborhood all day, George was sweating profusely.

Between the Subject and its Verb: A prepositional phrase can also be between the subject (S) and its verb (V) to help define the specific person or thing:

- The boy (S) *with him* is (V) his son.

Which boy is his son? The one that is with him.

- The store (S) *at the corner* sells (V) sandwiches.

Which store sells sandwiches? The one at the corner.

- The sky (S), *at sunset*, looked (V) like a carnivorous flower.

When did the sky look *like a carnivorous flower*? At sunset.

Practice

1/ Draw one line under each prepositional phrase and two lines under the object of each preposition.

1. American architect Frank Lloyd Wright was a key figure in modern architecture.
2. Wright produced designs for residences and commercial buildings.
3. His designs are known for their originality.
4. With a style based on natural forms, Wright's work is unique.
5. Though he studied civil engineering for a time, Wright worked in a design department.
6. On the side, Wright designed houses for clients of the firm.
7. The homes have low roofs and walls of windows.
8. Huge stone fireplaces are a central part of his home designs.
9. His commercial buildings have heavy walls with skylights for the primary light source.
10. At Robie House in Chicago, Wright blended the architecture with the surrounding landscape.
11. After 1893, Wright went out on his own.
12. He would become one of the most famous architects in the United States.
13. Taliesin West is a complex near Phoenix that became Wright's home, workshop, and school.
14. It is a series of structures with roofs of canvas and wood resting on walls of boulders.
15. The Guggenheim Museum in New York is another of Wright's creations.
16. It has a spiral design similar to the structure of seashells.
17. His designs are marked by the use of forms from nature.
18. One of his most famous buildings, Fallingwater, is located in a small town in Pennsylvania.
19. Cantilevers, or beams supported at one end, suspend the living room and terrace over a waterfall.
20. Falling water is now one of the most popular tourist attractions in Pennsylvania.

Absolute Phrases

1/ Introduction

Absolute phrases help student writers achieve a distinctive sound and rhythm to their sentences. The absolute phrase is useful for adding details, explanation, and description to sentences. This lesson is intended to offer clear, practical information for helping students develop a distinctive style in their writing.

2/ Definitions

Absolute phrases consist of nouns and pronouns followed by a participle and any modifiers of the noun or pronoun. Absolute phrases contain a subject (unlike participial phrases) and no predicate. They serve to modify an entire sentence.

An absolute phrase (also called a nominative absolute) is a group of words consisting of a noun or pronoun and a participle as well as any related modifiers.

Absolute phrases do not directly connect to or modify any specific word in the rest of the sentence; instead, they modify the entire sentence, adding information. They are always treated as parenthetical elements and are set off from the rest of the sentence with a comma or a pair of commas (sometimes by a dash or pair of dashes).

Examples of sentences converted to absolute phrase:

- After the conch was blown, Ralph called the boys to order = Conch blown, Ralph called the boys to order.
- Because her path was diverging in the autumn woods, she knew a momentous choice awaited her = Her path diverging in the autumn woods, she knew a momentous choice awaited her.
- His hand was aching from the strain. Odysseus carefully aimed his bow at the suitors = Hand aching from the strain, Odysseus carefully aimed his bow at the suitors.
- Romeo spied Juliet at the ball. All the faculties of his soul were proclaiming that she could teach torches a thing or two about burning brightly = Romeo spied Juliet at the ball, all the faculties of his soul proclaiming that she could teach torches a thing or two about burning brightly.

3/ How to form an absolute phrase?

Absolute phrases are formed using a noun and an adjective (which can be a participle, or a normal adjective, or a prepositional phrase) and other modifiers (optional). The adjective in the absolute phrase can be a participle, which it generally is, a normal adjective, or even a prepositional phrase that modifies the noun/pronoun. Since absolute phrases give nonessential

information and can be removed without altering the meaning of the sentence they modify, they are offset using a comma.

4/ Types of absolute phrases

There are two types of absolute phrases in terms of how they modify the main clause.

Type1: These are absolute phrases that give beautiful visuals of the event, making it imagery, adding more details to a sentence. These are very common in fiction writing.

Example: *It was pouring down rain heavily; a random girl stopped at my place asking to stay for a night, her clothes completely wet, her body trembling.*

We have two absolute phrases in the above sentence: *her clothes completely wet*, and *her body trembling*. Both the phrases are adding details to the main clause, giving us clear visuals of the scene.

Type2: These are absolute phrases that show a cause or a condition.

Example: *The weather being cloudy, we decided to stay home and not do hike the mountains.*

The absolute phrase in this sentence shows how it affected the main clause.

5/ Position of absolute phrases

Absolute phrases can come at the beginning, in the middle, or at the end of a sentence. They are generally used at the beginning of a sentence to set a certain tone and portray a dramatic picture of the event. But they can be placed at all these three positions. Examples:

- *A gun in his hands*, the thief asked me give him everything I had.
- The thief asked me give him everything I had, *a gun in his hands*.
- The thief, *a gun in his hands*, asked me give him everything I had.

Summary

- Absolute phrases start with a noun or a noun phrase.
- They do not have a finite verb in it.
- They modify the main clause in a sentence.
- They are offset from a sentence using a comma.
- Removing them will not change the meaning of a sentence.
- If an absolute phrase comes at the beginning of a sentence, it generally starts with a possessive pronoun: my, his, your, her, our, its, and their.

Practice

1/ In the following exercise, combine sentences to create one sentence containing an absolute phrase.

1. His partner was steadying the mares and stallions in the corral. John Grady branded and inoculated them.
2. His conscience was troubled and his lifelong beliefs were confused. Huck nonetheless decided to risk his eternal soul for Jim.
3. The true beast was finally recognized. Ralph realized that evil resides even in young boys in an idyllic setting.
4. Her eyes were transfixed by false righteousness and retribution. Her cries were piercing the courtroom. Abigail screamed that a yellow bird perched on the ceiling to attack her face.
5. His dreams were deferred for too long. He feared they were beginning to dry up like a raisin in the sun.
6. Grendel raced across the parquet floor of the castle. His eyes were gleaming. His claws were extended. His bloodlust was unsatisfied.
7. His legs were beginning to weaken. His heart was bursting for love of his brother. Doodle struggled to walk.
8. The vast, trunkless legs are standing in the desert. The shattered visage is lying beside. Ozymandias receives his due reward.
9. His hands were holding the reins. His aim was to stop for me. Death found me in my gossamer gown.
10. Her lips were curving into a smile. Janie strode down the streets of Eatonville in her overalls.

2/ Read each sentence. Decide whether the underlined phrase is an absolute phrase or participial phrase.

1. Her suspicions confirmed, the police officer made the arrest.
A. Absolute phrase
B. Participial phrase
2. Backing out of the driveway, I hit the mailbox.
A. Absolute phrase
B. Participial phrase
3. They will take the daytime train, the landscape inviting.
A. Absolute phrase
B. Participial phrase
4. My doubts relieved, I gained confidence as the game progressed.
A. Absolute phrase
B. Participial phrase

5. Peering through a microscope, the scientist identified several germs.

A. Absolute phrase

B. Participial phrase

6. His dogs panting with exertion, Hugh took a break from his run.

A. Absolute phrase

B. Participial phrase

7. Its shutters hanging limply in the wind, the house looked abandoned.

A. Absolute phrase

B. Participial phrase

8. The car rusted and worthless, I left it at the junkyard.

A. Absolute phrase

B. Participial phrase

9. Wearing a yellow raincoat, Lydia looked like a character in a novel.

A. Absolute phrase

B. Participial phrase

10. Everything planned in advance, the party went like clockwork.

A. Absolute phrase

B. Participial phrase

Appositive Phrases

1/ Definition

An appositive phrase is a group of words that functions as a noun and renames another noun or pronoun in a sentence. It consists of an appositive (a noun) and some modifiers. Since an appositive phrase is a noun in its purest form, it is also called an appositive noun phrase.

Most of the time, it gives non-essential or restrictive information: information that is not needed to identify a noun or a pronoun. When it gives non-essential information about the noun or the pronoun it identifies, it is offset using one comma (when it comes at the end of a sentence) or two commas: one before and one after it (when it comes in the middle of a sentence). But when it gives essential/restrictive information and identifies the noun or the pronoun with a name, it is not offset using commas.

2/ Types of Appositives

- *Rihanna, the love of my life, is going to London next week.*

The love of my life is an appositive phrase that's naming the noun it's sitting next to Rihanna. Since the appositive phrase is giving nonessential information (unnecessary to identify the noun Rihanna as it is already an identified name: a proper name), it is offset using two

commas: before and after it. When an appositive phrase gives non-essential information about a noun or a pronoun, it is called a *nonessential appositive* phrase or *nonrestrictive appositive phrase*.

- *We the servants of this kingdom want to get rid of corruption.*

The servants of this kingdom is the appositive phrase here that's identifying the pronoun 'we'. It tells us who we are. Without it, the sentence gives a different meaning. And since it is essential to make the meaning of the pronoun 'we' particular, it is not offset using commas.

- *My friends Ali and Adem help me with everything I do.*

Ali and Adem is the appositive phrase that's identifying the noun friends and telling us who they are. Without it, we won't know who my friends are.

- *Her roommate Anna Anderson does not talk to people courteously.*

Her roommate does not talk to people courteously is the core sentence. But do we know who this roommate is? We don't. It is a common noun; Anna Anderson identifies it with a proper noun. Now we know who her roommate is: Anna Anderson (an appositive).

- *Ali, his boss at work, is very strict.*

His boss at work is the nonessential appositive phrase that's renaming the noun 'Ali' with extra information. 'Ali' is a proper noun and does not need any information to be identified. The core sentence is Ali is very strict.

- *Last night, I got a chance to meet Narendra Modi, the Prime Minister of India.*

(The Prime Minister of India is the nonessential appositive phrase here. It's giving a new name to the proper noun Narendra Modi. Since it is coming at the end of the sentence, we used only one comma to offset it.)

- *Thor, the god of thunder, killed Thanos, the mad titan, in Avengers: Endgame.*

(We have two essential appositive phrases in this sentence: the god of thunder and the mad titan. The first appositive phrase the god of thunder is renaming the noun thor, and the second appositive phrase the mad titan is renaming the noun 'Thanos'.

3/ How to punctuate an appositive?

Before you punctuate an appositive phrase, you need to know if it's an essential or nonessential appositive. If it is an essential appositive, you don't have to punctuate it. It goes without any interruption (a comma or commas). But if it is a nonessential/ nonrestrictive appositive phrase, it is offset using commas.

Practice

1/ Underline the appositive or appositive phrase in each sentence.

1. Venus, the second planet from the sun, resembles Earth.
2. Some people prefer soft pretzels, large pretzels that are warmed, to ordinary pretzels.
3. My sister Pam marches in the band.
4. The rattlesnake, one of the most poisonous types of snake, is feared by many people.
5. My favorite comedians, Abbott and Costello, are in that movie.
6. The winner, the first runner to cross the finish line, will win a trophy.
7. My best friend Roberto is the treasurer of the Drama Club.
8. Asthma, a disease of the respiratory system, is sometimes controllable with medication.
9. The new boy in school, Derek Peterson, is from Montana.
10. My father, a former trumpet player, encouraged me to take lessons.
11. The chorus, a group made up of choir members, will perform tonight.
12. Beowulf, our assignment for English class, is about a hero of the middle ages.
13. That recliner, a lumpy old chair, is my uncle's favorite.
14. Our house, the two-story on the corner, is more than one hundred years old.
15. Her intelligence, a powerful asset, led her to a career in medicine.
16. Cindy and I always order the same dinner, a burrito and refried beans.
17. My neighbor Diane gives me a ride to school every morning.
18. In chemistry we worked on a chemical solution, a combination of two acids.
19. Only Mother, a very patient person, can tolerate Tommy's tantrums.
20. Davy Crockett, an American folk hero, was a pioneer who became a U.S. representative.

2/ Underline the appositive phrases in the following sentences once. Underline the appositives themselves twice.

1. The jade plant, a popular houseplant, is a hardy and adaptable succulent.
2. Gil's sister-in-law Marjorie is an attorney.
3. We enjoyed visiting Williamsport, a colonial village.
4. The actor Harrison Ford has starred in several action films.
5. Compact discs now have new music rival, digital audio tapes.
6. Melanie's boss, Ms. Green, allowed her to report to work late during track season.

3/ Some of the sentences below contain adjective clauses; others contain appositives. Identify the adjective clause or appositive in each sentence.

- a) John Reed, an American journalist, helped found the Communist Labor Party in America.
- b) My sister, who is a supervisor at Munchies, drives a company car.
- c) I took a cookie from Gretel, who is the woodcutter's daughter.
- d) I took a cookie from Gretel, the woodcutter's daughter.

- e) Og, the King of Bashan, was saved from the flood by climbing onto the roof of the ark.
- f) I once saw Margot Fonteyn, the famous ballerina.
- g) Elkie Fern, who is a professional botanist, led the kids on a nature hike.
- h) Elsa, a good country woman, has a daughter named Ulga.
- i) Paul Revere, who was a silversmith and a soldier, is famous for his "midnight ride."
- j) I read a biography of Disraeli, the 19th-century statesman, and novelist.

General Review of Phrases

1/ Write P for participle, I for infinitive, or G for gerund above each phrase in italics.

1. Do you want me *to talk to Rhonda for you?*
2. *Placing her arms at her sides*, she took a deep breath.
3. *Weather forecasting* is very intricate.
4. I saw Antonio *standing by his locker*.
5. *To reach our goal*, we will need two hundred dollars more.
6. *To attend Harvard* was Lionel's dream.
7. My goal was *getting ahead of the other runners*.
8. *Having beaten me at rummy again*, Mother laughingly apologized.
9. I found Donna's *whining tiresome*.
10. Mitch was asked *to submit his story to the school paper*.

2/ Underline each participle or participial phrase. Circle the noun it modifies.

1. Many campers tell about frightening encounters with skunks.
2. This animal, scampering along many wooded areas, lives only in the Western Hemisphere.
3. Skunks come in various sizes, depending on the type.
4. The striped skunk is the most common type.
5. It is a furry, black animal with white stripes radiating down its back.
6. In the daytime, sleeping skunks rest in underground dens.
7. Hunting at night, most skunks catch their own food.
8. Their diet consists mainly of small rodents, caterpillars, and other insects, but they also eat limited amounts of fruit and grain.
9. While out at night, wandering skunks sometimes surprise people.
10. The skunk is notorious for the foul, stinking liquid it sprays.
11. This liquid, called musk, comes from glands at the base of the tail.
12. Startled by a skunk, a person must remember to use caution.
13. Any alarmed person who sees a skunk should remain calm.
14. Running from the threat, many people scare the skunk.

15. Instinct causes a frightened skunk to spray.

3/ Underline each prepositional phrase. Write adj. (adjective) or adv. (adverb) in the blank to identify the kind of phrase. Circle each coordinating, correlative, and subordinating conjunction.

1. In the morning she was tired and cranky.
2. I not only can remember the name of that substitute teacher, but also can remember what he wore that day.
3. The realtor would not wait inside the house because it was spooky.
5. Our swingset and birdbath were damaged in yesterday's storm.
6. The shark swam around the coral reef when the fishing boat appeared.
7. Both strawberries and bananas are used in the fruit salad.
8. The first room on the left is yours.
9. The people became quiet before the golfer putted on the green.
10. All of the construction workers wore yellow hard hats and heavy work boots.
11. The sign in the front yard was neither correct nor legible.
12. My new CD player will be ready by Monday or Tuesday.
13. I looked into the classroom but saw nobody I knew.
14. Ryan never drinks iced tea without lemon and sugar.
15. They went fishing during the early morning hours since the weather was calmer.
16. The wooden fence between these houses needs nails and paint.
17. Although Mr. Wang coached the soccer team, most of his time was spent teaching health and physical education.
18. Elizabeth was brave during the crisis, but she panicked later.
19. Under the bed were a worn slipper and a giant dust ball.
20. The lanky man with the black hair and the bushy beard is our math teacher.

4/ Rewrite each of the following sentences by using the group of words in parentheses as an appositive phrase. If the phrase is not essential to the meaning of the sentence, set it off with commas.

1. James Joyce is considered one of the great writers of the English language. (a twentieth century novelist)

2. He wrote three novels, all of them set in Ireland. (the country of his birth)

3. The action in his novel takes place during one day in Dublin. (Ulysses)

4. The day is celebrated by some as Bloomsday. (June 16)

5. Bloomsday is named for Leopold and Molly Bloom. (the novel's central characters)

5/ Underline the appositives in the following sentences.

1. My son, the policeman, will be visiting us next week.
2. The captain ordered the ship's carpenters to assemble the Express Boat, a large rowboat.
3. Sakada, the playboy and writer, is very attached to his mother.
4. The actor Daro directed only one picture.
5. A sweet and lovable girl, Reaksa grew up to be a mentally troubled woman.
6. Queen Victoria, one of England's greatest monarchs, ruled for sixty-three years.
7. Puthea made Prohok, traditional Khmer food.
8. Razity, the lecturer at Norton University, is giving me writing lessons.
9. Pailin Rose, a well-known novel, has been filmed twice.
10. Chemistry, Sambo's favorite subject, is easy for him.

6/Rewrite each sentence or set of sentences below according to the guidelines that precede each practice question. Keep in mind that more than one correct response is possible.

- 1) Combine the two sentences below: Turn the second sentence into an absolute phrase and place it in front of the first sentence.

The storks circled above us. Their slender bodies were sleek and black against the orange sky.

- 2) Combine the two sentences below: Turn the second sentence into an absolute phrase and place it after the first sentence.

On the tops of the hills, the grass stands at its tallest and greenest. Its new seed plumes rise through a dead crop of last year's withered spears.

- 3) Create two absolute phrases by eliminating the words in bold.

*Odysseus comes to shore, **and** the skin **is** torn from his hands, **and** the sea water **is** gushing from his mouth and nostrils.*

- 4) Combine the three sentences below: Turn the second and third sentences into absolute phrases, and position them at the start of the sentence to establish a clear cause-effect relationship.

Norton vowed never to marry again. His first marriage ended in divorce. His second marriage ended in despair.

- 5) Omit the word "when" and turn the main clause—in bold—into an absolute phrase.

*When the double giant Ferris wheel circles, **the swaying seats are more frightening than a jet plane flying through a monsoon.***

6) Combine the following four sentences into a single sentence with a present participial phrase and two absolute phrases.

All afternoon the caravan passed by. The caravan shimmered in the winter light. Its numberless facets were gleaming. The hundreds of wagon wheels were turning in the dust in slow and endless motion.

7) Combine the following five sentences into a single sentence with a present participial phrase and three absolute phrases.

Six boys came over the hill. The boys were running hard. Their heads were down. Their forearms were working. Their breaths were whistling.

8) Begin your new sentence with "The buildings sit empty," and turn the rest of the sentence into an absolute phrase.

Jagged pieces of glass stick out of the frames of the hundreds of broken windows in the buildings that sit empty.

9) Combine these sentences by replacing the period with a comma and eliminating the word in bold.

*Proud of my freedom and bumhood, I stood in the doorway of the boxcar, rocking with the motion of the train. My ears **were** full of the rushing wind and the clattering wheels.*

10) Combine these three sentences by turning the first sentence into an absolute phrase and the third into a subordinate clause beginning with "where."

His hair was wet from the showers. He walked in the icy air to Luke's Luncheonette. There he ate three hamburgers in a booth with three juniors.