

Phrase Toolbox

Phrases are groups of words that do not contain both a subject and a verb. Collectively, the words in the phrase function as a single part of speech.

Prepositional phrase

a preposition plus its object and modifiers

Prepositions

to, around, under, over, like, as, behind, with, outside, etc.

Adjective prepositional phrase

Adjective prepositional phrases tell *which one, what kind, how many, and how much*, or give other information about a noun, a pronoun, a noun phrase, or a noun clause.

*The store **around the corner** is painted green.* (Which store is it? The store around the corner.)

*The girl **with the blue hair** is angry.*

Adverb prepositional phrase

Adverb prepositional phrases tell *how, when, where, why, to what extent, or under what condition* about a verb, an adjective, an adverb, an adverb phrase, or an adverb clause.

*Oscar is painting his house **with the help of his friends**.* (How is he painting his house? With the help of his friends.)

*Sally is coloring **outside the lines**.*

Infinitive phrase

An infinitive phrase consists of the word “to” plus a verb. Infinitive phrases can function as adjectives, adverbs, or nouns.

***To dance gracefully** is my ambition.* (subject of sentence)

*Her plan **to become a millionaire** fell through when the stock market crashed.* (functions as an adjective modifying “plan”)

*She wanted **to become a veterinarian**.* (noun—direct object of “wanted”)

*John went to college **to study engineering**.* (functions as an adverb, telling why he went)

Appositive phrase

An appositive phrase renames, or identifies, a noun or pronoun. When it adds information that is nonessential—information that could be omitted from the sentence without hindering understanding of the sentence—it is set off by commas.

*My teacher, **a woman with curly hair**, is very pretty.*

*Bowser, **the dog with the sharp teeth**, is coming around the corner.*

*I went to the mall yesterday with my friend **Linda**.* (Since I have many friends, I must include the name of the friend with whom I went to the mall. This appositive is essential and is therefore not set off by commas.)

Participial phrase

A participle is a verb form (past or present) that functions like an adjective. The phrase is the participle plus its modifiers.

Blinded by the light, *Sarah walked into the concert hall.*

Swimming for his life, *John crossed the English Channel.*

Gerund phrase

A gerund is an “-ing” verb form that functions as a noun. The phrase is the gerund plus its complements and modifiers.

Walking in the moonlight *is a romantic way to end a date.* (subject of the sentence)

He particularly enjoyed **walking in the moonlight with his girlfriend.** (direct object)

He wrote a poem about **walking in the moonlight.** (object of the preposition)

Walking the dog *is not my favorite task.* (subject)

Absolute phrase

An absolute phrase (also called a *nominative absolute*) is a group of words consisting of a noun or pronoun, an “-ing” or “-ed” verb form, and any related modifiers. Absolute phrases modify the whole sentence rather than a particular part of it. They are always set off from the rest of the sentence with a comma or pair of commas (or dashes) because they are parenthetical elements. An absolute phrase, very simply put, is an independent clause with the “was” or “were” omitted. Absolute phrases are valuable in constructing concise, layered sentences.

Their minds whirling from the avalanche of information provided by their teacher, *the students made their way thoughtfully to the parking lot.*

His head pounding, his hands shaking, his heart filled with trepidation, *the young man knelt and proposed marriage to his sweetheart.*

The two lovers walked through the garden, **their faces reflecting the moonlight, their arms twined about each other, their footsteps echoing in the stillness of the night.**

Note: An independent clause has a subject and a verb and can stand alone as a sentence. A dependent, or subordinate, clause has a subject and a verb but does not express a complete thought. It often begins with a subordinating conjunction such as *when, because, although, while, since,* etc.