

# The Phrase

Recognize a *phrase* when you see one.

A phrase is two or more words that do not contain the subject-verb pair necessary to form a clause. Phrases can be very short or quite long. Here are two examples:

After lunch

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

Certain phrases have specific names based on the type of word that begins or governs the word group: noun phrase, verb phrase, prepositional phrase, infinitive phrase, participle phrase, gerund phrase, and absolute phrase.

## Noun Phrases

A noun phrase includes a noun—a person, place, or thing—and the modifiers—either before or after—which distinguish it. The pattern looks like this:

**OPTIONAL MODIFIER(S)** + **NOUN** + **OPTIONAL MODIFIER(S)**

Here are some examples:

The shoplifted pair of jeans

**Pair** = noun; **the, shoplifted, of jeans** = modifiers.

A cat that refused to meow

**Cat** = noun; **a, that refused to meow** = modifiers.

A great English teacher

**Teacher** = noun; **a, great, English** = modifiers.

Noun phrases function as subjects, objects, and complements:

**The shoplifted pair of jeans** caused Nathaniel so much guilt that he couldn't wear them.

**The shoplifted pair of jeans** = subject.

Jerome adopted **a cat that refused to meow**.

**A cat that refused to meow** = direct object.

With her love of Shakespeare and knowledge of grammar, Jasmine will someday be ***a great English teacher***.

***A great English teacher*** = subject complement.

## Verb Phrases

Sometimes a sentence can communicate its meaning with a one-word verb. Other times, however, a sentence will use a verb phrase, a multi-word verb, to express more nuanced action or condition. A verb phrase can have up to four parts. The pattern looks like this:

**AUXILIARY VERB(S)** + **MAIN VERB** + **VERB ENDING**

**WHEN NECESSARY**

Here are some examples:

Had cleaned

***Had*** = auxiliary verb; ***clean*** = main verb; ***ed*** = verb ending.

Should have been writing

***Should, have, been*** = auxiliary verbs; ***write*** = main verb; ***ing*** = verb ending.

Must wash

***Must*** = auxiliary verb; ***wash*** = main verb.

Here are the verb phrases in action:

Mom ***had*** just ***cleaned*** the refrigerator shelves when Lawrence knocked over the pitcher of orange juice.

Sarah ***should have been writing*** her research essay, but she couldn't resist another short chapter in her Stephen King novel.

If guests are coming for dinner, we ***must wash*** our smelly dog!

## Prepositional Phrases

At the minimum, a prepositional phrase will begin with a preposition and end with a noun, pronoun, gerund, or clause, the "object" of the preposition.

The object of the preposition will often have one or more modifiers to describe it. These are the patterns for a prepositional phrase:

**PREPOSITION** + **NOUN, PRONOUN, GERUND, OR**  
**CLAUSE**

**PREPOSITION** + **MODIFIER(S)** + **NOUN, PRONOUN,**  
**GERUND, OR CLAUSE**

Here are some examples:

On time

**On** = preposition; **time** = noun.

Underneath the sagging yellow couch

**Underneath** = preposition; **the, sagging, yellow** = modifiers; **couch** = noun.

From eating too much

**From** = preposition; **eating** = gerund; **too, much** = modifiers.

A prepositional phrase will function as an adjective or adverb. As an adjective, the prepositional phrase will answer the question *Which one?*

The spider **above the kitchen sink** has just caught a fat fly.

Which spider? The one **above the kitchen sink!**

The librarian **at the check-out desk** smiles whenever she collects a late fee.

Which librarian? The one **at the check-out desk!**

The vegetables **on Noel's plate** lay untouched the entire meal.

Which vegetables? The ones **on Noel's plate!**

As an adverb, a prepositional phrase will answer questions such as *How?* *When?* or *Where?*

While sitting in the cafeteria, Jack catapulted peas **with a spoon.**

How did Jack launch those peas? **With a spoon!**  
**After breakfast,** we piled the dirty dishes in the sink.

When did we ignore the dirty dishes? ***After breakfast!***

Amber finally found the umbrella wedged ***under the passenger's front seat.***

Where did Amber locate the umbrella? ***Under the passenger's front seat!***

## Infinitive Phrases

An infinitive phrase will begin with an infinitive [to + simple form of the verb]. It will often include objects and/or modifiers that complete the thought. The pattern looks like this:

**INFINITIVE** + **OBJECT(S) AND/OR MODIFIER(S)**

Here are some examples:

To slurp spaghetti

To send the document before the deadline

To gulp the glass of water with such thirst that streams of liquid ran down his chin and wet the front of his already sweat-soaked shirt

Infinitive phrases can function as nouns, adjectives, or adverbs. Look at these examples:

***To avoid another lecture from Michelle on the benefits of vegetarianism*** was Aaron's hope for their date at a nice restaurant.

***To avoid another lecture from Michelle on the benefits of vegetarianism*** functions as a noun because it is the subject of the sentence.

Cheryl plans ***to take microbiology next semester*** when Professor Crum, a pushover, is teaching the course.

***To take microbiology next semester*** functions as a noun because it is the direct object for the verb ***plans***.

The worst thing ***to happen during the severe thunderstorm*** was a lightning strike that fried Clara's computer.

***To happen during the severe thunderstorm*** functions as an adjective because it modifies ***thing***.

Ryan decided to mow the long grass on the front lawn **to keep his neighbors from complaining to the homeowners association.**

**To keep his neighbors from complaining to the homeowners association** functions as an adverb because it explains *why* Ryan mowed the lawn.

## Participle Phrases

A participle phrase will begin with a present or past participle. If the participle is present, it will dependably end in **ing**. Likewise, a regular past participle will end in a consistent **ed**. Irregular past participles, unfortunately, conclude in all kinds of ways [Check a dictionary for help].

Since all phrases require two or more words, a participle phrase will often include objects and/or modifiers that complete the thought. The pattern looks like this:

**PARTICIPLE** + **OBJECT(S) AND/OR MODIFIER(S)**

Here are some examples:

Flexing his muscles in front of the bathroom mirror

Ripped from a spiral-ring notebook

Driven crazy by Grandma's endless questions

Participle phrases always function as adjectives, adding description to the sentence. Read these examples:

The stock clerk **lining up cartons of orange juice** made sure the expiration date faced the back of the cooler.

**Lining up cartons of orange juice** modifies the noun **clerk**.

Elijah likes his eggs **smothered in cheese sauce**.

**Smothered in cheese sauce** modifies the noun **eggs**.

**Shrunk in the dryer**, the jeans hung above John's ankles.

**Shrunk in the dryer** modifies the noun **jeans**.

## Gerund Phrases

A gerund phrase will begin with a gerund, an **ing** word, and will often include other modifiers and/or objects. The pattern looks like this:

**GERUND** + **OBJECT(S) AND/OR MODIFIER(S)**

Gerund phrases look *exactly* like present participle phrases. How do you tell the difference? You must determine the *function* of the phrase.

Gerund phrases always function as nouns, so they will be subjects, subject complements, or objects in the sentence. Read these examples:

***Washing our dog Gizmo*** requires strong arms to keep the squirming, unhappy puppy in the tub.

***Washing our dog Gizmo*** = subject of the verb ***requires***.

A good strategy for avoiding dirty dishes is ***eating every meal off of paper towels***.

***Eating every meal off of paper towels*** = subject complement of the verb ***is***.

Susie tried ***holding the slippery trout***, but the fish flipped out of her hands and splashed back into the stream.

***Holding the slippery trout*** = direct object of the verb ***tried***.

### Absolute Phrases

An absolute phrase combines a noun and a participle with any accompanying modifiers or objects. The pattern looks like this:

**NOUN** + **PARTICIPLE** + **OPTIONAL OBJECT(S) AND/OR**  
**MODIFIER(S)**

Here are some examples:

His brow knitted in frustration

***Brow*** = noun; ***knitted*** = participle; ***his, in frustration*** = modifiers.

Her fingers flying over the piano keys

***Fingers*** = noun; ***flying*** = participle; ***her, over the piano keys*** = modifiers.

Our eyes following the arc of the ball

***Eyes*** = noun; ***following*** = participle; ***arc*** = direct object; ***our, the, of the ball*** = modifiers.

Rather than modifying a specific word, an absolute phrase will describe the whole clause:

***His brow knitted in frustration***, Thomas tried again to iron a perfect crease in his dress pants.

Francine played the difficult concerto, *her fingers flying over the piano keys.*

We watched Leo launch a pass to his fullback, *our eyes following the arc of the ball.*



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