

Phrases

Overview:

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. Because sentences are made up of phrases and clauses, understanding these basic elements of sentence structure will help you to create writing that is clear, concise, stylistically interesting and free of errors such as sentence fragments. Here you will find a basic overview of the different types of phrases and how they function within sentences.

Types of Phrases and their Functions

Noun Phrase

A *noun phrase* contains a noun and its modifiers and functions as a noun within a sentence.

Examples:

The tree with the pink blossoms hangs over the sidewalk, sprinkling flowers on the path.

He decided to wear the yellow shirt.

Notice that the noun phrase in the first sentence is the subject of the sentence while the noun phrase in the second is the object.

Verb Phrase

A *verb phrase* is a group of words that includes the main verb and any of its auxiliary verbs.

Examples:

We are working hard as ever.

Ted might eat the cake.

Adjectival Phrase

An *adjectival phrase* is a group of words that acts like an adjective within a sentence.

Examples:

The girl in the white dress is Ruby.

The very small kitten jumped at the big dog.

Adverbial Phrase

An *adverbial phrase* is a group of words that acts as an adverb in a sentence.

Examples:

To excel in studies, we have to go above and beyond.

I went into town to visit my friend.

Appositive Phrase

An *appositive phrase* renames a noun and functions as a noun within a sentence.

Examples:

Carol, my friend from college, lives in San Francisco.

Margaret Atwood, bestselling author, wrote *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Here, my friend from college renames Carol, just as bestselling author is another way to refer to Margaret Atwood.

Gerund Phrase

A *gerund phrase* contains an -ing verb and its modifiers or complements. A gerund phrase functions as either the subject or the object in a sentence.

Examples:

Playing tennis is one of Shannon's favorite activities.

Cameron prefers watching TV.

In the first example, playing tennis is the subject of the sentence while in the second example, watching TV is the object.

Infinitive Phrase

An *infinitive phrase* contains a verb in its infinitive form (starting with "to"), and its modifiers or complements. Infinitive phrases can function as nouns, adjectives or adverbs.

Examples:

Shannon likes to play tennis.

Exercising everyday is one way to increase your energy level.

To get to campus, take the 7th Street exit off of the 22.

The infinitive phrase in the first example functions as a noun and is the object in the sentence. In the second example, the infinitive phrase functions as an adjective modifying "way," and in the third sentence the infinitive phrase functions as an adverb modifying "take."

Participial Phrase

A *participial phrase* contains a participle and its modifiers or complements. Remember that participles are verbs that end in -ing, -ed, or -en (except for some irregular verbs). Participial phrases function as adjectives within a sentence.

Examples:

The student sitting in the front row raised his hand to answer the question.

The sculpture, broken during the last earthquake, is no longer valuable.

You will notice that the participial phrase in the second example is set off by commas. This is because it is a nonrestrictive phrase. That means that, while it modifies sculpture and adds detail to the sentence, if the clause were removed the sentence would still have the same meaning.

Prepositional Phrase

A *prepositional phrase* contains a preposition, a noun or pronoun, and possibly one or more adjectives. Prepositional phrases can function as nouns, adjectives or adverbs within a sentence.

Examples:

My birthday is on Monday.

The tree with purple blossoms hangs over the sidewalk, sprinkling flowers along the path.

In the first example, on Monday functions as a noun and serves as a complement. In the second example, with the purple blossoms functions as an adjective modifying tree, while both over the sidewalk and along the path function as adverbs modifying hangs and sprinkling, respectively.

Absolute Phrase

An *absolute phrase* most often contains a noun or pronoun, a participle, and modifiers; however, rather than modifying one single element of a sentence, absolute phrases modify the entire sentence. You'll notice that absolute phrases (again, most often) have a subject modified by a participle but no verb. You can think of absolutes as "almost sentences" because adding "was" or "were" to most of them creates an independent clause. A second way to identify an absolute phrase is to look for a possessive pronoun (my, his, her, its, our, their) at the beginning of the phrase. You'll find absolute phrases not only at the beginning of sentences, but also as subject-verb splits and sentences closers.

Examples:

His study habits thorough, Adam earned an A in the class.

Lauren, her mouth watering, waited for the pasta to cool before taking a bite.

The players staggered into the locker room defeated, their faces showing disappointment.

In the first sentence, the absolute phrase modifies the entire independent clause "Alex earned an A in the class." Likewise, the absolute phrase in the second example also modifies the entire independent clause rather than one single element of it.

Summary:

Understanding phrases and how they function within sentences will help you thoughtfully create sentences whose meanings are clear and precise. Try using a variety of phrases within your sentences to help vary sentence structure for more interesting writing.