

Phrases: Prepositional, Verbal, Absolute, and Appositive

There are 4 basic types of phrases:

1. Prepositional Phrases, which are phrases that begin with a preposition followed by a noun or pronoun, along with any words that modify that noun.

Ex: a) *Jim went to school **without his books**.*

b) ***Behind the cushions** John found more bits of food and other debris then he imagined possible.*

2. Verbal phrases, whose key element is a verbal. Verbals are not verbs, but are words derived from verbs, but which function as a noun, adjective, or adverb. There are 3 basic types of verbals: infinitives, gerunds, and participles.

A. Infinitive phrases include as their basic element an infinitive verb, which is usually the verb with a “to” in front of it. These phrases may function as adjectives, adverbs, or nouns.

Ex: a) *The lecturer used as jokes **to fit his topic** in order to keep his class awake.* (This phrase functions as an adjective because it modifies the noun “jokes”.)

b) *The professor spoke at length **to instruct his class about the evils of capitalism**.* (This phrase functions as an adverb because it modifies the verb “spoke”.)

c) ***To work at nights** was just impossible for him, since he grew tired by 10 PM.* (This phrase functions as a noun and is the subject of the sentence.)

B. Gerund phrases include a gerund, which are verbs ending in “-ing.” These phrases always function as nouns.

Ex: ***Working at nights** was just impossible for him, since he grew tired by 10 PM.* (Again, this phrase functions as noun and is the subject of the sentence.)

C. Present participial phrases also include a gerund (-ing words), but the phrase acts as an adjective instead.

Ex: ***Running home**, Jane tripped over the curb.*

D. Past participial phrases include the past participial of the verb and always function as adjectives.

Ex: ***Doubled over in pain**, the man screamed for help.*

Notes:

a) In both present and past participial phrases you need to watch for dangling modifiers, which are adjectives that don’t describe the appropriate noun in the sentence. An example of an INCORRECT dangling modifier is “Having stopped by the store for tea, the owner ran out of the store and told them that the store had been just robbed.”

3. Absolute phrases, which are phrases that stand grammatically independent from the sentence. Usually they have both a noun and a gerund that acts as a verb substitute. Be careful with these—it’s easy to confuse this with a dangling modifier (discussed above).

Ex: ***The lecture having finished ten minutes early**, we headed over to the coffee shop.*

4. Appositive phrases, which are words or groups of words placed beside another word whose meaning it expands. The word or phrase must be the same part of speech and fulfill the same grammatical function as the word it modifies.

Ex: a) *My father, **an important business man in the city of Dallas**, spent much of his free time on the golf course.*

b) *He spoke in a loud, or rather, **commanding**, voice.*