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Phrases

Overview: Phrases are groups of related words that do not form a complete sentence. They act as parts of speech within sentences. In other words, phrases are groups of words that serve as nouns, adjectives or adverbs in sentences. Because sentences are made up of phrases and clauses, understanding these basic elements of sentence structure will help you 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.

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

Examples:

- 1) *The tree with the purple blossoms* hangs over the sidewalk, sprinkling flowers along the path.
- 2) He decided to wear *the yellow shirt*.

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

An **Appositive Phrase** renames a noun and functions as a noun within a sentence.

Examples:

- 1) Carol, *my friend from college*, lives in San Francisco.
- 2) Elephants, *the largest land mammals*, are very intelligent.

Carol is renamed by the appositive phrase “my friend from college.” Similarly, elephants are renamed by the phrase “the largest land mammals.” Both of these appositive phrases are simply other ways of referring to the subject, but both give us additional information and make the sentences more interesting. Note the commas used to set off the appositive 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:

- 1) *Playing tennis* is one of Shannon’s favorite activities.
- 2) Cameron prefers *watching TV*.

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

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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:

1) Shannon likes *to play tennis*.

2) Exercising everyday is one way *to increase your energy level*.

The infinitive phrase in the first example functions as a noun and is the object of 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.”

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:

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

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

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.

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:

1) Mr. Le’s birthday is *on Monday*.

2) The tree *with the 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.

An **absolute phrase** most often contains a noun or pronoun, a participle, and modifiers; however, rather than modifying one element of a sentence, absolute phrases modify the entire sentence. You’ll notice that absolute phrases usually have a subject 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.

Examples:

1) *His study habits thorough*, Alex earned an A in the class.

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

3) 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.

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Practice: Now look at your own writing. Choose a few sentences and try to figure out what types of phrases they contain. You will notice, from your writing as well as the examples given here, that some phrases also have other phrases within them. 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 your sentence structure for more interesting writing.