

# THE PHRASE

## Recognize a phrase when you find one.

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A phrase is two or more related 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

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 PHRASE

A **noun phrase** includes a **noun**—a person, place, or thing—and the **modifier(s)** (either before and/or after) that distinguish it.

This is the pattern:

**Optional Modifier(s)** + **Noun** + **Optional Modifier(s)**

Here are 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 could not 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 PHRASE

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.

This is the pattern:

**Auxiliary Verb(s)** + **Main Verb** + **Verb Ending If Necessary**

Here are 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 could not resist another short chapter in her Stephen King novel.

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

## PREPOSITIONAL PHRASE

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 examples:

On time

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

Underneath the sagging yellow couch

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

Against someone strong

**Against** = preposition; **someone** = pronoun; **strong** = modifier.

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?*

Read these examples:

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 front seat.

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

## INFINITIVE PHRASE

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.

This is the pattern:

**Infinitive** + **Object(s) and/or Modifier(s)**

Here are 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**.

Consider 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*** = noun (subject of the verb ***was***).

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

***To take microbiology next semester*** = noun (direct object for the verb ***plans***).

The worst expression **to see on Dad's face** is disappointment.

***To see on Dad's face*** = adjective (describing ***expression***).

Ryan mowed the long grass **to keep his neighbors from complaining to the homeowners' association**.

***To keep his neighbors from complaining to the homeowners' association*** = adverb (*why* Ryan mowed the lawn).

## **PARTICIPLE PHRASE**

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. (See **this list** for examples.)

Since all phrases require two or more words, a participle phrase will often include **objects** and/or **modifiers** that complete the thought.

This is the pattern:

**Participle** + **Object(s) and/or Modifier(s)**

Here are 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 came to the tops of John's ankles.

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

## GERUND PHRASE

A **gerund phrase** will begin with a **gerund**, an **ing** word, and will often include other **modifiers** and/or **objects**.

This is the pattern:

**Gerund** + **Object(s) and/or Modifier(s)**

Gerund phrases are formed *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 paper towels**.

**Eating every meal off 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 PHRASE

An **absolute phrase** combines a **noun** and a **participle** with any accompanying **modifiers** and/or **objects**.

This is the pattern:

**Noun** + **Participle** + **Optional Modifier(s) and/or Object(s)**

Here are 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.

Their eyes following the arc of the ball

*Eyes* = noun; *following* = participle; *arc* = direct object; *their, 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.

*His brow knitted in frustration* describes not only Thomas but also his focus on the ironing.

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

*Her fingers flying over the piano keys* describes not only Francine but also her method of playing.

The coaches watched Leo launch a pass down the field, **their eyes following the arc of the ball**.

*Their eyes following the arc of the ball* describes not only the coaches but also the intensity of their observation.

