

Phrases

A Grammar Help Handout, by Abbie Potter Henry

A phrase is a word group that has no subject and no verb and that modifies another part of the sentence.

Prepositional Phrase:

A prepositional phrase always begins with a preposition and includes at least one noun or pronoun that is the object of that preposition. Prepositional Phrases can also contain adjectives, adverbs, and coordinating conjunctions. Sarah sings (with her younger sister and two friends). The prepositional phrase is “with her younger sister and two friends.” The preposition is “with,” and the two objects of the preposition are “sister” and “friend.” This particular prepositional phrase also contains a coordinating conjunction “and” and three adjectives, “her, younger, two.”

Prepositional phrases can act like either adjectives or adverbs. The prepositional phrase above is an adverb because it is in some way modifying the verb “sings.” The following prepositional phrase is an adjective because it is modifying a noun. The group with the girl singers is really good. The phrase “with the girl singers” is modifying the noun “group.”

Common Prepositions

about	above	across	after*	among	around	as*
at	because of	before*	behind	below	beneath	beside
between	by	during	except	for***	from	in
in spite of	into	like**	near	of	on	onto
over	past	since*	through	till	to	toward
under	until*	up	upon	with	without	

*These words, **after**, **as**, **before**, **since**, and **until**, are sometimes used as prepositions and sometimes used as subordinating conjunctions. (See your Grammar Terms Handout for a definition of Subordinating Conjunctions.)

This word, like, can also be a verb as in “I really like you.” When used as a preposition, like, means similar to as in “She smells **like a rose.”

***This word, **for**, can also be used as a coordinating conjunction, which connects two clauses. (See your Grammar Terms Handout for a definition of Coordinating Conjunctions.)

Placement of Prepositional Phrases: There are no absolute rules about where a prepositional phrase can be placed. However, it must be placed in such a way that it is obvious what word or words are being modified by the phrase. For example, consider the following sentence: Andrea took off her hat in the museum. “In the museum” is acting like an adverb, modifying the verb “took” because “in the museum” answers the question where the action took place. If we add a subordinate clause with another verb, we may find that “in the museum” no longer modifies “took.” Andrea took off the hat which her mother had given her in the museum. Now, our sentence is saying that Andrea’s mother gave her the hat in the museum. To keep the integrity of our original sentence intact, we can write our sentence as follows. In the museum, Andrea took off her hat which her mother had given her.

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Verbal Phrases

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The verbal phrases include present participial phrases, past participial phrases, and infinitive phrases. The biggest danger with these verbal phrases is accidentally confusing the verbal in the phrase with an actual verb. Remember, verbs tell time by changing form, and phrases do not contain verbs. Therefore, the word that looks like a verb in the following phrases is not actually a verb; it is a verbal. (See the handout on complete verbs for a thorough explanation of verbs.)

Present Participial Phrase:

A present participial phrase is a phrase that contains a present participle verb form such as swimming, going, being, or any other verb form ending in “ing.*” The present participial phrase can also contain nouns, pronouns and modifiers and will often have a prepositional phrase embedded in it.

Example: The girl *sleeping on the bench* robbed a store last night.

Present participial phrases function like adjectives, modifying a noun or a pronoun in another part of the sentence. “The boy *leaning against the fence* is my brother.” In this sentence, “leaning against the fence” is describing the noun “boy.”

Placement of Present Participial Phrases: The only place a present participial phrase can live is immediately before or after the noun or pronoun it is modifying.

Example: Walking through the swamp, Andrea encountered an alligator.

Andrea, *walking through the swamp*, encountered an alligator

If I place the phrase “walking through the swamp” any place else in the sentence, it is no longer obvious that this phrase is modifying “Andrea.” For example, the sentence “Andrea encountered an alligator *walking through the swamp*” implies that the alligator is walking through the swamp because of the placement of the phrase.

*In addition to being part of a participial phrase, a present participle can also function as a noun. When it functions as a noun, it is called a gerund and does not indicate a phrase.

Example: Walking through the swamp can be dangerous.

In the sentence above, the word “walking” is not part of a phrase; instead, it is a gerund functioning as a noun; in fact, it is the subject of the verb “can be.”

Past Participial Phrase:

A past participial phrase is a verbal phrase that contains a past participle acting like an adjective. You must be very careful not to confuse these words with verbs. The only way to be absolutely sure that you have a verbal is to make sure that you cannot change the form of the word or add a helping verb to it to change the time the action or being is taking place. For example, consider the following two uses of the verb forms “defeated” and “exhausted.”

The exhausted army completely defeated their enemies after a long battle.

Defeated after a long battle, the army completely exhausted their enemies.

In the first sentence, “defeated” is a verb, and “exhausted” is a past participle adjective describing the noun “army.” In the second sentence, the opposite is true; “exhausted” is the

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verb, and “defeated” is creating a past participial phrase, “defeated after a long battle.” It is also an adjective describing the army.

Placement of Past Participial Phrases: Like your present participial phrases, the only place a past participial phrase can live is immediately before or after the noun or pronoun it is modifying.

Infinitive Phrase:

An Infinitive phrase is a verbal phrase that begins with the word “to” and includes a present tense verb form. Examples are: *to go, to sleep, to eat, to be*, etc. These phrases can act like nouns, adjectives, or adverbs.

Nouns: *To sleep* eight hours is a great luxury. In this sentence “to sleep” is acting like a noun and is actually the subject of the verb “is.”

Adjective: The desire *to sleep* comes upon me at odd hours. In this sentence “to sleep” is modifying the abstract noun “desire.”

Adverbs: I like *to sleep* eight hours. In this sentence “to sleep” is modifying the verb “like.”

Placement of Infinitive Phrases: There are no hard and fast rules for where to place these phrases, but when used as an adjective or an adverb, they will usually come immediately after the word that they are modifying.