

Phrases

Knowing that all sentences have a subject and a verb is only the first step in identifying a complete sentence. To understand and practise proper sentence structure, you must first learn the different phrases, their roles in sentences, and the ways to link them together.

What are phrases?

Phrases, like clauses, are a group of related words, but they have no subject and verb. They are used as a single part of speech, functioning as a noun, adverb, or adjective in a sentence.

Four Common Types of Phrases

To make identifying phrases easier, let's look at the four most common types of phrases.

A. Prepositional Phrases – Prepositional phrases consist of a preposition word and the object of that preposition. These phrases most often function as adjective or adverb.

Example: *In the light of day, the graveyard didn't seem so scary.*

B. Participial Phrases – Participial phrases begin with either a present participial verb (“ing”) or a past participial verb (“ed”). These phrases always function as adjectives.

C. Gerund Phrases – Gerund phrases also use the “ing” form of a verb, but they function only as nouns.

Example: *Eating snails doesn't seem scary when they are called escargot.*

D. Infinitive Phrases – Infinitive phrases begin with an infinitive verb (a verb preceded by the word “to”). These phrases can function as noun, adjective, or adverb.

Example: *The Scouts went camping to practice their survival skills.*



Exercise 1:

Underline all the phrases in the following sentences. Look for prepositions, participles, gerunds, and infinitives to guide you. The first example has been done for you.

1. Blowing in the wind, the leaves created a whirl of colour around the trees.
2. The birthday girl was happy to see her friends having fun.
3. Over the next hill lies a haunted house with bats flying out of the chimney.
4. Holding a bat in her right hand, Heather rounded the corner to confront her attacker.
5. Cecilia loves riding horses in the thick forest.

Distinguishing between Clauses and Phrases

The key difference between clauses (c) and phrases (p) is the presence of the subject and verb in a clause. Keep in mind that phrases may sometimes be part of a larger clause.

Example A: With the help of her best friend, Melissa completed her homework on time.

P

P

C

P

In this example, there are three prepositional phrases and one independent clause. Within the clause *Melissa completed her homework on time* is the phrase *on time*.

Example B Forgetting her knapsack at home, she couldn't hand in her report.

P

P

C

Exercise 2:

First, label the subject(s) and verb(s) in the following sentences. Then, distinguish between the clauses and phrases by underlining the phrases and circling the clauses. The first example has been done for you.

1. Protecting the whales is important to my cousin who is a marine biologist. S
2. Although she loved to eat fish, she hated the smell.
3. Playing Monopoly at two in the morning, the group of girls got angry with each other, and they left in a huff.



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4. With all her courage, she confronted her fear of heights.
5. To keep a steady job, you must be attentive, dedicated, and enthusiastic when you're working.
6. Carrie recognized her friend across the room, so she crossed the room to talk to her.

Essential and Non-Essential

Both clauses and phrases can be either *essential* or *non-essential*. An **essential** clause or phrase is so-named because its meaning is essential to the meaning of the sentence.

Example A: *The clock **that my great grandfather had owned** was passed down to me through the generations.*

The clause *that my great grandfather had owned* is essential to the sentence's meaning since the focus is on a specific clock and not just any clock.

A **non-essential** clause or phrase provides information that is unimportant to the meaning of the sentence. This is almost like an interruption in the sentence.

Example B: *Going to the washroom before a trip, **whether you need to or not**, is always a good idea.*

The clause *whether you need it or not* is not essential to the sentence's meaning. Without that clause the sentence still makes sense.

Example C: *The Legend of Zorro, **filled with fantastic fighting scenes**, is sure to win an award this year.*

In this sentence, the phrase *filled with fantastic fighting scenes* describes the movie but is not essential to the focus of the sentence, the winning.

Note: When a clause or phrase is non-essential to the sentence's meaning, that clause or phrase is surrounded by commas in the sentence. (See Examples C and D above)



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Exercise 3:

Create your own sentences using these sentence formulas.

1. One independent clause.
2. Two independent clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction (FANBOYS).
3. One independent clause interrupted by a non-essential clause.
4. A dependent clause followed by an independent clause.
5. Two independent clauses with at least one dependent clause.
6. Two phrases with an independent clause (Note: the phrases may be part of that clause).



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