

## OTHER PHRASES: VERBAL, APPOSITIVE, ABSOLUTE

A **phrase** is a group of words that *lacks a subject, a predicate (verb), or both*. The English language is full of them: *under his supervision, apple trees in blossom, having completed the soccer season*. You are probably familiar with prepositional phrases--they begin with prepositions, end with nouns (or pronouns), and they describe, or modify, a particular word in the sentence: *along the Yahi Trail, above Salmon Hole*. But other kinds of phrases also enrich the English language: *verbal, appositive, and absolute* phrases.

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### 1. Verbals are verb look-alikes.

**A verbal looks like a verb but does not act like a verb.** In the following sentences, verbals are used as something other than verbs:

*Climbing* El Capitan was out of the question. (Noun and subject of the sentence)

The *applauding* crowd rose to its feet. (Adjective)

I despise *frozen* peas. (Adjective)

He intends *to study* agricultural science. (Noun and direct object).

There are three kinds of verbals:

- **Gerunds** (-ing forms that function as nouns)
- **Participles** (present or past participle verb forms that function as adjectives)
- **Infinitives** (the root form of a verb preceded by *to*; it can function as a noun, adjective, or adverb)

### **Gerund phrases are nouns.**

A **gerund** is an **-ing verb form that actually functions as a noun**. Any -ing verb used in the predicate (part of the verb) of a sentence must be accompanied by a helper verb such as *is, was, or has been*; a gerund lacks this helper. As a result, a gerund can never function as a verb, but it can do anything another noun can do. For example, the following gerund phrase is the subject of a sentence:

*(Backpacking in Little Yosemite Valley)* was unforgettable.

This one-word gerund is the direct object of an action verb:

Tom explained *(rappelling)* as we clambered up Half Dome.

The following gerund phrase is the object of a preposition:

*We worried about **being swept away over the waterfall as we swam.***

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### **Participial phrases are adjectives.**

**Participial verbals--words or phrases--are adjectives.** They look like present participle (-ing) or past participle (-ed or -en) verb forms. A past participle verb used in the predicate of a sentence must be accompanied by a helper verb such as *has, had, or have*; participles or participial phrases functioning as adjectives lack this helper. The following participial phrase describes the noun *bear*:

***Grunting and snuffling noisily,** the bear reached on tiptoe for our **suspended** food bags.*

Above, *suspended* is a past participle form functioning as an adjective.

Below, *frozen* and *making* introduce participial phrases:

***Frozen in anticipation,** our **muffled breath making scarcely a sound,** we watched the bear ascend the tree toward the ropes.*

*Frozen in anticipation* modifies the pronoun *we*. *Making scarcely a sound*, on the other hand, modifies *breath*. *Muffled* is a participial adjective also describing *breath*.

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### **Infinitive phrases are nouns, adjectives, or adverbs.**

**An infinitive is the root, or simple, form of a verb preceded by *to*: *to expect, to enroll, to have thought.* (Because *to* is a common preposition, infinitives are often mistaken for prepositional phrases, which they are not.)** Infinitives are easy to recognize, with their *to* + *verb* pattern. **They can play many roles in a sentence--noun, adjective, or adverb.**

In the following examples, infinitive phrases are used as nouns--in this case **subject** and **direct object**, respectively:

***To watch** the bear toss our things around was distressing.*

*We tried **to signal** our friends on Half Dome with a text message, but failed.*

On the other hand, the following infinitive phrase is used as an adjective to modify plans:

*Our plans **to continue** on to Tuolumne Meadows changed suddenly once we lost our food supplies.*

The following infinitive is an adverb phrase modifying the verb *will use* (adverbs answer the questions *when, where, how, and why*):

*Next time, **to prevent** the loss of our food cache, we will use bear canisters instead.*

(Note: Some verbs require an infinitive [*claim to know*] and some require a gerund [*avoid stating*]. And some verbs differ dramatically in meaning if you switch from gerund to infinitive [*stop smoking, stop to smoke*]).

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## 2. Appositive phrases are nouns.

**An appositive is a noun phrase that renames or restates the preceding noun or pronoun:**

*An overpowering fragrance, **apple trees in blossom**, drifted through the open window.*

Appositive phrases are almost always punctuated as parenthetical elements of a sentence set off by commas. An exception is a one-word appositive, where commas are unnecessary:

*My brother **Joseph** reads six or seven blogs a day.*

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## 3. Absolute phrases modify absolutely everything.

**Unlike other modifiers, absolute phrases do not modify a particular word in a sentence; rather, they modify the entire sentence--setting the scene or background overall, so to speak. An absolute phrase typically consists of a noun (or pronoun) and a participle:**

*umbrellas **tossing** in the wind,*

his *hopes dashed* at last.

In the following examples, notice that the absolute phrases cannot logically be said to modify any particular word of the main clause:

***Umbrellas tossing in the wind**, the students at the bus stop huddled under the scant shelter of the elms.*

*Rodrigo unhappily prepared to vacate and sell his dream home, **his hopes for a reconciliation dashed at last**.*

Like appositives, absolute phrases are set off from the rest of the sentence by commas.