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Back to the Basics III: Subordinate Word Groups

Tenielle Fordyce-Ruff

I've spent a lot of time writing about how to create better sentences. I've covered everything from parts of a sentence, to cutting clutter from sentences, to adding eloquence to sentences.

But I've never covered those word groups that simply cannot function as a sentence. These groups of words, instead, function as other parts of speech, usually as adjectives, adverbs, or nouns.¹ This time, we will cover prepositional phrases, verbal phrases, and absolute phrases. And I'll give you some handy advice on using these word groups correctly.

Prepositional phrases

A prepositional phrase begins with a preposition and ends with a noun (or a noun equivalent). The noun, or noun equivalent, is the object of the preposition. Prepositional phrases may also contain words that modify the noun.



The road to hell is paved with good intentions.

In this example, *to* and *with* are the prepositions. *Good* modifies *intentions* and is part of the prepositional phrase.

Okay — that was grammar heavy, so let's unpack things a little before we get to some more examples.

Prepositions are the words we place before nouns to turn those nouns into modifiers. There aren't many prepositions in English. Here are the most common ones:

Preposition words

about	between	near	than
above	beyond	next	through
across	but	of	throughout
after	by	off	till
against	concerning	on	to
along	considering	onto	toward
among	despite	opposite	under
around	down	out	underneath
as	during	outside	unlike
at	except	over	until
before	for	past	unto
behind	from	plus	up
below	in	regarding	upon
beneath	inside	respecting	with
beside	into	round	within
besides	like	since	without

Some prepositions, though, are multiple words: *along with*, *as well as*, *in addition to*, *instead of*, *next to*, and *up to*.

Prepositional phrases can function as nouns:

For the judge to change his mind would be a miracle.

or adverbs:

The shoplifter strolled through the store.

or adjectives:

Variety is the spice of life.

When using a prepositional phrase as an adjective or an adverb, place it as close as possible to the word it modifies to avoid ambiguity, awkwardness, or unintentional humor.

One morning I shot an elephant in my pajamas.²

That is either a very small elephant or I wear really large pajamas!
Is the man with black hair named Thom here?

Which is named Thom, the man or the hair?

Two sisters were reunited after eighteen years in a checkout line.³

Whew! I get annoyed after waiting for five minutes in a checkout line!

Verbal phrases

A verbal is a verb form that doesn't function as the main verb in a clause or sentence. Verbals include infinitives (*to* plus the base form of a verb: *to write*), present participles (the *-ing* form of a verb: *writing*), and past participles (the form of a verb that usually ends in *-d*, *-ed*, *-n*, *-en*, or *-t*: *written*).

Verbals can take objects, complements, and modifiers to form verbal phrases. We classify these phrases into three types: participial phrases, gerund phrases, and infinitive phrases.

Participial phrases

Participial phrases always function as adjectives in a sentence. These verbals include either present participles or past participles. They can also include nouns, pronouns, and prepositions. Participial phrases modify the noun in the sentence.

Beating you over the head with examples, I hope to make identifying subordinate word groups easier.

He sometimes felt like writing was an enigma wrapped in a conundrum.

Participial phrases can dangle, creating illogical, ambiguous, or even incoherent sentences.

Wishing she could write, comma rules always gave her fits.

Here, *comma rules* is the subject of the sentence. Thus this sentence means that the comma rules wish she could write.

To fix a dangler, give the sentence a clear subject.

Wishing she could write, she felt taunted by the comma rules.

Gerund phrases

Gerund phrases always function as nouns — usually as subject complements, direct objects, or objects of a preposition. A gerund's verbal is always a present participle.

Complaining about writing poorly won't help.

Beating you over the head with examples might help!

To distinguish between a participial phrase and a gerund, you will need to figure out how the verbal is functioning in the sentence. If it is modifying a noun, you have a participial phrase; if it is acting as a noun, you have a gerund.

Like participial phrases, gerunds can also dangle.

While driving to Paul, my map was lost.

How, exactly, was my map driving?

After finishing the research, writing the brief was easy.

Who did the research, and who wrote the brief? To fix a dangling gerund, give the sentence a proper noun.

While driving to Paul, I lost my map.

Infinitive phrases can function as adjectives, adverbs, or nouns. Infinitive phrases are always formed with *to* and the base form of a verb.

After finishing her research, the associate found writing the brief was easy.

Infinitive phrases

Infinitive phrases can function as adjectives, adverbs, or nouns. Infinitive phrases are always formed with *to* and the base form of a verb.

To write well is a lofty goal.

Like other verbal phrases, infinitive phrases can create confusion when they dangle.

To edit your writing properly, it must be sent to another writer.

Here, *to edit* doesn't have a logical subject, so it is left dangling. Rewrite sentences with dangling infinitive phrases to include a logical subject.

To edit your writing properly, you must send it to another writer.

Absolute phrases

Unlike prepositional phrases and verbal phrases, absolute phrases don't modify a single word. Instead, these phrases modify the whole sentence. Absolute phrases are made up of a noun or pronoun, a participle, and their modifiers.

His words dipped in honey, the attorney mesmerized the jury.

Conclusion

Using subordinate word groups can add spice and variety to your writing. Just be careful to use them correctly.

Sources

- Diana Hacker, *A Writer's Reference*, 348-350 (3d ed. Bedford 1995).
- *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 232-34, 247-48 (16th ed. The University of Chicago Press 2010).
- Anne Enquist & Laurel Currie Oates, *Just Writing: Grammar, Punctuation, and Style for the Legal Writer*, 169-71 (3d ed. Aspen 2009).

Endnotes

1. For a refresher on the parts of speech, see *Back to the Basics II: Parts of Speech*, The Advocate (August 2013).
2. This is the beginning of a joke by Groucho Marx: "One day I shot an elephant in my pajamas. How he got in my pajamas I'll never know." John Bartlett and Justin Kaplan, ed., *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*, 693 (16th ed. Little, Brown & Company 1992).
3. Modified from a headline quoted in Barbara Walraff, *Word Court*, 291-94 (Harcourt, 2000).

About the Author

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