

8. THE ABSOLUTE PHRASE

We devote now an entire chapter to a grammatical construction that is a favorite with many writers but which does not conform to the guidelines for any of the phrases or clauses we have considered so far. It is called the **absolute phrase**, and it is probably the single most important element you can learn to improve your writing.

The absolute phrase is a group of words which is set off from the main clause, usually by commas, but which helps to develop the actions, characters, or ideas established in the main clause. It is made by removing the finite verb (usually *was* or *were*) from a sentence. The resulting absolute phrase thus consists of a subject and the remainder of the original predicate. Here is how the transformation occurs.

| | |
|----------------------------|--|
| Main clause: | She held the boa constrictor carefully. |
| Sentence to be added: | Its skin was surprisingly smooth and dry. |
| Remove the finite verb: | <i>was</i> |
| Resulting absolute phrase: | its skin surprisingly smooth and dry |
| Final sentence: | She held the boa constrictor carefully, <i>its skin surprisingly smooth and dry.</i> |
| | |
| Main clause: | The pole vaulter rose over the crossbar. |
| Sentence to be added: | His legs were kicking toward the sky. |
| Remove the finite verb: | <i>were</i> |
| Resulting absolute phrase: | his legs kicking toward the sky |
| Final sentence: | The pole vaulter rose over the crossbar, <i>his legs kicking toward the sky.</i> |

The predicate of an absolute phrase may be any of the grammatical constructions which regularly follow *was* or *were* in a sentence. Below, the absolute phrase in each sentence is in *italics*. Determine what the subject is in each one, and then observe how the grammatical construction indicated is being used as the predicate of the absolute phrase.

| | |
|------------------------------|--|
| Present participle: | He stood there, <i>his hand shielding his eyes from the sun.</i> |
| Past participle: | The radio-controlled airplane lay quietly on the ground, <i>its wings broken from the sudden impact.</i> |
| Infinitive: | The prisoner looked around frantically, <i>his only hope to jump onto the approaching train.</i> |
| Noun: | The actress read her lines, <i>her voice hardly a whisper.</i> |
| Pronoun: | The campground was quiet, <i>the only sounds those of the crickets and jumping fish.</i> |
| Adjective: | She kicked at the back door, <i>her hands full of groceries.</i> |
| Adverb: | The gym teacher demonstrated the first position, <i>her arms out in front of her.</i> |
| Prepositional phrase: | He stepped into the bank, <i>a revolver in each hand and a ski mask over his head.</i> |
| Comparison: | He closed his eyes and got ready for his first kiss, <i>his puckered lips like those of a hungry goldfish.</i> |

With as a marker of the absolute phrase: Sometimes an absolute phrase will begin with the word *with*. It should not be confused with a prepositional phrase. Here, removing the *with* still leaves an absolute phrase. In a prepositional phrase, removing the *with* would destroy the phrase.

The tall ship glided into the harbor, *with its sails bulging majestically*.

Which of the examples on the previous page could begin with *with*? Which version do you like better?

Sometimes an absolute phrase will begin a sentence. Such positioning is especially useful when you want your reader to know immediately either why or how the main action occurred.

With the rain starting to fall, we headed toward the shore.

Her hands folded in her lap, she offered the Thanksgiving prayer.

Notice in the second example that the word *folded* is the past participle form of the verb (her hands *were folded*) and not the past tense of the verb. In English, both the past and the past participle forms of regular verbs end in *-ed*. You must make sure you are using the proper form, or you will end up with run-on sentences. Test your absolute phrase by inserting the helping verb *was* or *were* in front of the *-ed* verb form. If it now reads as a logical sentence, your absolute phrase is correct.

THE ABSOLUTE PHRASE: SAMPLES

She thundered down the seawall road, *arms held out behind her like the silver lady on a Rolls Royce, steam snorting from her wide nostrils*.

—John Varley, *Wizard*

Up through the dim pine trees they went, *the constable's breath wheezing in her ears*.

—Natalie Babbitt, *Tuck Everlasting*

Rosamunde looked like always, in a big blue windbreaker with PAL on it, in denim overalls that did nothing for her figure, *her brown hair thick and curly in two ponytails at the sides of her head, her face all wrinkled up around her beady eyes*, the way it got when she was thinking hard.

—Cynthia Voigt, *Izzy, Willy-Nilly*

James stood looking at me with his mouth open, *the prominent lower teeth bared to the gums* as his lip dropped in shocked disbelief.

—Dick Francis, *Nerve*

With scarcely a word said, four of us, the chauffeur, butler, gardener, and I, hurried down to the pool.

—F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

There was a black-haired girl with the same blue eyes, and her hair hung long and she was dressed all in black, *with a girdle of silver about her waist*.

—Roger Zelazny, *The Chronicles of Amber*, Vol. 1

"Don't tell me you are going to send me away!" exclaimed Oliver, *the tone of his voice alarmed and serious*.

—Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist*

A beautiful job, *his hair combed, his tie straight, the light hitting his eyes just right to make them glisten*.

—William Kittredge and Steven Krauzer, *The Great American Detective*

THE ABSOLUTE PHRASE

Name: _____

EXERCISE A: writing absolute phrase predicates

Accuracy _____ Creativity _____

Directions: In the sentences below, the subject for an absolute phrase has been provided. Complete the phrases with predicates as directed.

1. She played the guitar solo with confidence, her fingers _____

 (present participle as predicate)
2. On the count of three we all jumped into the water, our arms _____

 (past participle as predicate)
3. Everyone had arrived at the dress rehearsal by six o'clock, the actors _____

 (infinitive as predicate)
 the stage hands _____, and
 the director _____
 (infinitive as predicate)
4. The antique roll-top desk was my family's most treasured heirloom, its many
 compartments _____, and its golden
 oak finish _____
 (noun as predicate)
5. The movie billed as the "laugh hit of the summer" was a big disappointment, with
 jokes so _____
 (adjective as predicate)
6. She looked like a Parisian model, her dress _____

 (pronoun as predicate)
7. He stood at attention in front of the colonel, his eyes _____

 (adverb as predicate)
8. The table was set for the banquet, with the food _____

 (prepositional phrase as predicate)

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9. At the end of the race he was exhausted, his legs _____
(comparison as predicate)

10. She looked into the dark room, her eyes _____
(any kind of predicate)

THE ABSOLUTE PHRASE

Name: _____

EXERCISE B: writing absolute phrases

Accuracy _____ Creativity _____

Directions: In each space below, write a complete absolute phrase that develops the idea established in the independent clause. Write both the subject and the predicate as directed.

1. At last we arrived at the cabin, _____

(subject)
(present participle as predicate)

_____ .
2. With _____

(subject)
(past participle as predicate)

the graduates crossed the stage.
3. The matador, _____

(subject)
(present participle as predicate)

_____, slowly approached the motionless bull.
4. The dogs sniffed their way along the trail, _____

(subject)
(adverb as predicate)

_____ and _____

(subject)
(adjective as predicate)

_____ .
5. With _____

(subject)
(past participle as predicate)

_____, the sky diver pushed off into oblivion.
6. We divided the car wash crew into two groups, _____

(subject)
(infinitive as predicate)

_____ and _____

(subject)
(infinitive as predicate)

_____ .
7. His history essay left much to be desired, _____

(subject)
(noun as predicate)

_____ and _____

(subject)
(noun as predicate)

_____ .
8. With _____

(subject)
(present participle as predicate)

_____, my dog easily won "Best of Show."

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Accuracy _____

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are approximately 20 lines visible. The paper appears to be a standard notebook page.