

# THE ACADEMIC SUPPORT CENTER

## PHRASES

A **phrase** is a group of related words that operates as a single part of speech. Phrases do not contain subjects or verbs.

1. **Noun phrase:** a noun plus its modifiers. Noun phrases are used as subjects, objects of verbs or prepositions, or appositives.  
**the neighbor's dog**

2. **Appositive phrase:** an appositive plus its modifiers. Appositives are noun phrases that follow other nouns and explain them.  
**the neighbor's dog, a very large beast,**

3. **Verb phrase:** the main verb plus its helping verbs.  
**has been digging**

Verb phrases can be interrupted by adverbs  
**has not been digging**

or by subjects in sentences that ask questions.  
**Has Rover been digging in the yard?**

4. **Prepositional phrase:** a preposition plus its object and modifiers. Prepositional phrases are used as adjectives or adverbs.  
**in our front yard**

The following three kinds of phrases are often referred to as **verbals**. They are formed from verbs, but they function as some other part of speech.

5. **Infinitive phrase:** *to* plus the root form of a verb and any other words necessary to complete the meaning of the phrase. Infinitive phrases are used as nouns, adjectives, or adverbs.  
**to find his bone**

6. **Participial phrase:** the present participle form of a verb, always ending in *-ing*, and any other words necessary to complete the meaning of the phrase,  
**barking loudly**

or the past participle form of a verb, usually ending in *-ed*, and any other words necessary to complete the meaning of the phrase.  
**buried yesterday**

Participial phrases are used as adjectives.

7. **Gerund phrase:** the present participle form of a verb, always ending in *-ing*, and any other words necessary to complete the meaning of the phrase. Gerunds are used as nouns.  
**finding the bone**

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## USING PHRASES

Here are two sentences showing how these phrases can be used:

Barking loudly, the neighbor's dog, a very large beast, has been digging in the yard to find his bone buried yesterday. Finding the bone made Rover happy.

**(participial phrase)**

*Barking loudly,*

**(noun phrase)**

*the neighbor's dog,*

**(appositive phrase)**

*a very large beast,*

**(verb phrase)**

*has been digging*

**(prepositional phrase)**

*in our front yard*

**(infinitive phrase)**

*to find his bone*

**(participial phrase)**

*buried yesterday.*

**(gerund phrase)**

*Finding the bone* made Rover happy.

### CONFUSING PHRASES WITH OTHER PARTS OF SPEECH

Don't confuse phrases with clauses. Clauses have a subject and verb, but phrases do not.

Don't confuse the object of a prepositional phrase with the subject of a sentence. The subject cannot be in a prepositional phrase.

Don't confuse an infinitive phrase with a prepositional phrase. An infinitive phrase consists of the word *to* followed by a verb. A prepositional phrase must have a noun or pronoun as the object.

Don't confuse a participial phrase with the verb of a sentence. A participial phrase modifies a noun or pronoun. A verb shows the action of the sentence or a state of being. The present and past participles have helping verbs when they are the main verbs of sentences.

#### Example

**Barking loudly**, the dog dug furiously. (participial phrase, modifies dog)

The dog **was barking** loudly. (verb, shows action; *was* is the helping verb)

### PUNCTUATING PHRASES

There are two situations when a phrase needs punctuation to separate it from the rest of the sentence:

1. Follow the phrase with a comma when the phrase is introductory (at the beginning of a sentence).

**To find his bone**, the dog had to dig for a long time.

2. Set off the phrase with commas when the phrase is nonrestrictive (not essential to the meaning of the sentence).

My neighbor's dog, **a very large beast**, found his bone.