phrases

To write well, you need to understand how to form sentences. Phrases are one of the building blocks of sentences. Phrases are made of parts of speech, and they are combined to form clauses. Clauses are combined to form sentences. This handout will orient you to the different phrases.

Note: For this handout we have chosen to follow The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language *since it is the most comprehensive and up-to-date source available. Some of the vocabulary and terms may be different than those you were taught previously.*

Phrase Structure

Heads

Phrases are named after their head, which is the most important part of the phrase. For example, the head of a noun phrase (NP) is a noun, and the head of a preposition phrase (PP) is a preposition.

Noun Phrase (Head Bolded): the big blue **ox** from North Dakota

Preposition Phrase (Head Bolded): under the sea

Dependents

All the other parts of a phrase are called dependents—these parts **depend on the head**. There are three main types of dependents: complements, modifiers, and determiners.

Complements are dependents that a head needs in order for the phrase to be grammatical.

Verb Phrase with Complement ("Put" is the Head): She **[put (the book) on the shelf]**

Verb Phrase without Complement ("Put" is the Head) (Ungrammatical): She **[put ( ) on the shelf]**

Some heads only allow or **license** specific types of complements. For example, the verb "put" licenses an object (usually a noun phrase) and another complement (usually a preposition phrase). However, it only licenses certain prepositions:

Licensed PP Complement: put the book **[on** the shelf**]**

Unlicensed PP Complement (Ungrammatical): put the book **[until** the shelf.**]**

Modifiers are non-essential dependents. They can be removed without making the phrase ungrammatical.

Verb Phrase with Modifier: Ran **quickly**

Verb Phrase without Modifier: Ran

Determiners are special dependents within noun phrases that indicates the quantity or definiteness of the

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noun.

Word or Phrase?

"Phrase" in everyday language means "a group of words." However, in the context of phrase-based grammar, even single words are considered a phrase. They are just heads without dependents.

NP (Multiple Words): Angry people who don't use their turn signal

NP (Single Word): People

Noun Phrases (NP)

Function

Noun phrases can serve as subjects or objects within a clause. They can also serve as predicative complements, providing more information about a subject or object. Lastly, they can serve as complements to a preposition (traditional grammars call this the "object of a preposition").

Subject: The cat ran up the stairs.

Object: The cat ate **the rat**.

Predicative Complement: They made the cat **their pet**.

Note: In this case, "their pet" provides more information about "the cat."

Complement of Preposition: The cat fell asleep on **the couch**.

Pronouns

In the context of phrase grammar, pronouns count as a special subclass of nouns.

Determiners

Determiners are special dependents that indicate the definiteness or quantity of nouns. They are usually determinatives, determinative phrases, or possessive noun phrases.

Determiner (Determinative): **the** big red dog

Determiner (Determinative Phrase): almost all dogs

Determiner (Possessive Noun Phrase): My sister's dog.

Note: For more information on determimtatives, please see our "Parts of Speech" [handout](#).

Complements

Nouns have two main types of complements: preposition phrases and subordinate clauses.

PP Complement: the purchase **of the kitten**

Subordinate Clause Complement (Content): the cat's suspicion **that its owner would return soon**

Subordinate Clause Complement (Non-finite): the cat's ability **to stare out the window all day**

Note: For more information on subordinate clauses, please see our "Clauses" [handout](#).

Pre-head Modifiers

Like the name implies, pre-head modifiers go before the noun. These modifiers include adjective phrases (AdjP), other noun phrases (minus determiners), and verb phrases (VP) headed by a gerund-

participle or a past participle.

AdjP Modifier: The **very tall** man

NP (without determiners) Modifier: The **North Dakota** Police

VP Modifier: Some **hastily written** verses

Post-head Modifiers

Post-head modifiers come after the noun. These include preposition phrases, noun phrases, and relative and non-finite clauses.

PP Modifier: the cat **from the pound**

AdjP Modifier: the cat **asleep on the couch**

NP Modifier: a cat **that color**

Relative Clause: the cat **that we rescued from the pound**

Non-finite Clause: the cat **living under our porch**

Remember, there is a difference between a preposition phrase complement and a preposition phrase modifier. Preposition phrase complements are closely related to verbs and objects. Verbs have noun phrase complements (i.e., objects); nouns do not. Instead, nouns use preposition phrase complements to convey similar information. Compare the following two sentences:

Noun with PP Complement: the purchase **of the kitten**

Verb with NP Complement: purchased **the kitten**

A preposition phrase modifier does not correspond to an object.

PP Modifier: the cat **on the couch**

Apposition

Certain post-head noun phrase modifiers can stand in place of the noun they modify. These modifiers essentially rename the original noun. When these two elements are side by side, they are **appositives**. Compare the two examples below:

NP with **Appositive NP Modifier: my cat Ginger**

NP with **Non-appositive NP Modifier: a cat her size**

There are two types of apposition: integrated and supplemental. The difference depends on context. **Integrated appositives** are essential to the meaning of the clause. They cannot be removed. However, **supplemental appositives** are not essential and can be removed. Supplementals are set off by commas. Think of the commas as handles you could use to lift the appositive out of the phrase.

Integrated Appositive (NP in Brackets): Of all my pets, **[**my cat **Ginger]** whines the least.

Supplemental Appositive (NP in Brackets): Of all my pets, **[**my cat, **Ginger,]** whines the least.

Supplemental Appositive Removed (NP in Brackets): Of all my pets, **[**my cat] whines the least.

Note: The difference between these two appositives depends on context. In the integrated appositive, we can assume that the speaker owns more than one cat and is specifying a particular cat: Ginger. In the supplemental appositive, since "Ginger" can be removed, we can assume the speaker has just one cat.

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Verb Phrases (VP)

Function

Just as the verb functions as the head of the verb phrase, the verb phrase functions as the head of the clause.

Complements

The primary complements of verbs are noun phrases functioning as objects of the verb.

> **NP Complement (Object):** ate **the rat**
>
> **PP Complement:** told it **to him**
>
> **NP Complement (Predicative Complement):** is **a cat**
>
> **AdjP Complement (Predicative Complement):** is **sick**

Modifiers

Modifiers in verb phrases include adverb phrases (AdvP), preposition phrases, and noun phrases. They also include both finite and non-finite clauses.

> **AdvP Modifier:** slept **recently**
>
> **PP Modifier:** slept **in the shade**
>
> **NP Modifier:** sleep **tomorrow**
>
> **Finite Clause Modifier (Content Clause):** sleep **whether she needs to or not**
>
> **Non-finite Clause Modifier ("To" Infinitival):** sleep **to avoid having to be petted**
>
> *Note:* For more information on clauses, please see our [handout](#) on this topic.

Modifiers by Meaning

You can also categorize verb phrase modifiers by meaning. Since these are categories of meaning (semantics) and not form (syntax), different phrases can fulfill the same role. For example, an adverb phrase and a preposition phrase could both express an idea of time.

> **Manner:** pounced **playfully**
>
> **Place:** hid **under the couch**
>
> **Time:** adopted **last Wednesday**
>
> **Duration:** purred **until dawn**
>
> **Frequency:** meows **every five minutes**
>
> **Purpose:** scratches **to be let in**
>
> **Condition:** sleeps **if she is tired**
>
> **Concession:** plays **although she is tired**

Preposition Phrases (PP)

Function

Generally, preposition phrases function as complements and modifiers in the larger structure of the clause.

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Complement (Essential): The cat put the mouse **in its dish**.

Modifier (Non-essential): The cat went to sleep **in its box**.

In some clauses, preposition phrases can function as the subject or object.

Subject: After finals is the best time to adopt a cat.

Object: I will keep **under the litter box** clean.

Preposition phrases can also function as complements and modifiers in other phrases, as can be seen in the other sections of this handout.

Complements

Prepositions take a variety of complements, including noun phrases, other preposition phrases, adjective phrases, adverb phrases, and subordinate clauses. Some prepositions do not need a complement.

NP Complement: from **the pound**

PP Complement: from **underneath the couch**

AdjP Complement: left the cat **[**for **dead**.**]**

AdvP Complement: until **very recently**

Subordinate Clause Complement: since **we bought the cat**

Note: Traditional grammars classify these prepositions as subordinating conjunctions.

No Complement: The cat climbed up.

Note: Traditional grammars classify these prepositions as part of phrasal verbs.

Modifiers

Prepositions are generally modified by noun phrases and adverb phrases.

NP Modifier: five feet underneath our feet

AdvP Modifier: nearly underneath our feet

Recursion

Preposition phrases can take noun phrases as complements, which in turn can contain additional preposition phrases. This situation can lead to recursion.

Recursive Preposition Phrases: There's a cat **on the cushion of the couch in the living room of the house on the street across town from the school.**

Adjective Phrases (AdjP)

Function

Adjective phrases primarily function as modifiers within noun phrases or as predicative complements within the larger clause structure.

Modifier inside NP: the **black** cat

Predicative Complement: The cat is **black**.

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Complements

Adjectives take preposition phrases and subordinate clauses as complements.

PP Complement: afraid **of me**

Subordinate Clause Complement: happy **that we got away**

Modifiers

Adjectives are usually modified by adverb phrases. They are sometimes modified by determinative phrases, preposition phrases, and noun phrases.

AdvP Modifier: extremely playful

DP Modifier: that young

PP Modifier: lazy **in most respects**

NP Modifier: three months old

Adverb Phrases (AdvP)

Function

Adverb phrases work to modify the heads of other phrases—except nouns. They also function as adjuncts in the larger clause structure.

Note: For more information on adverb phrases, please see our "Basic Clause Structure" handout.

Complements

Adverbs can have preposition phrases as complements, especially those beginning with the preposition "for." Unlike their corresponding adjectives, adverbs do not take subordinate clauses as complements.

PP Complement: separately **from the other cats**

"For" PP Complement: luckily **for the cat**

Modifiers

Adverbs are modified similarly to adjectives. Mostly they are modified by other adverbs, but they are sometimes modified by determinative phrases, preposition phrases, and noun phrases.

AdvP Modifier: extremely playfully

DP Modifier: that playfully

PP Modifier: later **in the cat's life**

NP Modifier: three months early

Determinative Phrases (DP)

Function

Determinative phrases indicate the definiteness or quantity of a noun. However, they are sometimes used as modifiers in other phrases (see above).

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Complements

Determinatives that make a comparison, such as "more" or "less," take prepositional phrases headed by "than" as a complement.

"Than" PP Complement: More **than fifty**

Modifiers

Determinatives that express quantity are frequently modified by adverb phrases, preposition phrases, noun phrases, or other determinatives.

AdvP Modifier: nearly fifty

PP Modifier: at most fifty

NP Modifier: a bit more

DP Modifier: not enough

References

Huddleston, R., & Pullum, G.K. (2002). *The Cambridge grammar of the English language*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

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Phrase structure rules. Phrase-structurerules are a way to describe a given language ' s syntax . They are used to break a natural language sentence down into its constituentparts (also known as syntactic categories) namely phrasalcategories and lexicalcategories (aka parts of speech). Phrase structure rules were commonly used in transformational grammar (TGG), although they were not an invention of TGG ; rather , early TGG ' s added Phrase Structure Rules are rules of the sort X→YZ This rule says 'take the node X and expand it into the nodes Y and Z'. Alternately, going from right to left (or from below), it says 'if you have a Y and a Z next to each other, you can combine them to make an X'. 1 Phrase structure. 1Such phrase structure rules are called Context Free Grammars (CFG) and were invented by Noam Chomsky in 1956. A closely related model was used by Pa¯n. ini to describe the grammar of Sanskrit in around 500 B.C. 2.