Notes on Phrases and Clauses

ELAGSE9-10L1: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.

b. Use various types of phrases (noun, verb, adjectival, adverbial, participial, prepositional, absolute) and clauses (independent, dependent; noun, relative, adverbial) to convey specific meanings and add variety and interest to writing or presentations.

What is a phrase?

A phrase is a group of words without both a subject and predicate. Phrases combine words into a larger unit that can function as a sentence element. For example, a participial phrase can include adjectives, nouns, prepositions and adverbs; as a single unit, however, it functions as one big adjective modifying a noun (or noun phrase). See this overview of phrases for more.

- **Noun Phrase** - "The crazy old lady in the park feeds the pigeons every day." A noun phrase consists of a noun and all of its modifiers, which can include other phrases (like the prepositional phrase in the park). More examples.
  - **Appositive Phrase** - "Bob, my best friend, works here" or "My best friend Bob works here." An appositive (single word, phrase, or clause) renames another noun, not technically modifying it. See this page from the Armchair Grammarian for everything you ever wanted to know about appositives.
  - **Gerund Phrase** - "I love baking cakes." A gerund phrase is just a noun phrase with a gerund as its head.
  - **Infinitive Phrase** - "I love to bake cakes." An infinitive phrase is a noun phrase with an infinitive as its head. Unlike the other noun phrases, however, an infinitive phrase can also function as an adjective or an adverb. More examples.
- **Verb Phrase** - The verb phrase can refer to the whole predicate of a sentence (I was watching my favorite show yesterday) or just the verb or verb group (was watching).

- **Adverbial Phrase** - The adverbial phrase also has two definitions; some say it's a group of adverbs (very quickly), while others say it's any phrase (usually a prepositional phrase) that acts as an adverb -- see this second definition.

- **Adjectival Phrase** - As with adverbial phrases, adjectival phrases can either refer to a group of adjectives (full of toys) or any phrase (like a participial or prepositional phrase) that acts as an adjective -- see this second definition.

- **Participial Phrase** - "Crushed to pieces by a sledgehammer, the computer no longer worked" or "I think the guy sitting over there likes you." A participial phrase has a past or present participle as its head. Participial phrases always function as adjectives.
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- **Prepositional Phrase** - "The food on the table looked delicious." A prepositional phrase, which has a preposition as its head, can function as an adjective, adverb, or even as a noun.

- **Absolute Phrase** - "My cake finally baking in the oven, I was free to rest for thirty minutes." Unlike participial phrases, absolute phrases have subjects and modify the entire sentence, not one noun. Almost a clause, the absolute phrase can include every sentence element except a finite verb. For example, "My cake finally baking in the oven" would be its own sentence if you just added one finite verb: "My cake was finally baking in the oven." See Absolute Phrase for more.

What is a clause?

A clause is essentially a phrase, but with both a subject and predicate (more on those in the next post). Clauses are either dependent or independent. An independent clause can exist by itself as a complete sentence (as in "I love grammar."). While a dependent clause cannot.

Dependent or Subordinate Clauses

A dependent or subordinate clause depends on an independent clause to express its full meaning (as in "Because I love grammar."). These clauses begin with a dependent word, like a subordinating conjunction or a relative pronoun.

Dependent clauses can function as nouns, adjectives, and adverbs:

- **Noun Clause** - "The boy wondered if his parents bought him what he wanted for Christmas." A noun clause can replace any noun in a sentence, functioning as a subject, object, or complement (see English Grammar: Basic Sentence Elements).

- **Adjective Clause (or relative clause)** - "I listened to the song that you told me about." An adjective clause describes a noun just like an adjective. Which song? The new song, the good song, the song that you told me about. Often called relative clauses, they're either restrictive or nonrestrictive (also called defining and non-defining, essential and nonessential, or integrated and supplementary):
  - **Restrictive Clause** - "The building that they built in San Francisco sold for a lot of money." A restrictive clause begins with a relative pronoun like that or who (or sometimes which -- see Which Versus That). It specifies or restricts the noun; in this case, it specifies which building the speaker is referring to. Note: the relative pronoun is often omitted.
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("The building (that) they built"), leaving what is called an elliptical clause or contact clause.

- **Nonrestrictive Clause** - "The building, *which they built in San Francisco*, sold for a lot of money." A nonrestrictive clause begins with a relative pronoun like *which* or *who*. It adds extra information about an already-specific noun; in this case, there's only one building to talk about, whereas the example for the restrictive clause implies that there could be several buildings.

- **Adverb Clause** - "I'll do the laundry *when I'm out of clothes.*" Like all adverbials, adverb clauses express when, where, why, and how something occurs. A dependent clause is an adverb clause if you can replace it with an adverb, as in "I'll do the laundry *later.*"

Note: *appositives* can include clauses, but I've yet to find a source mentioning an "appositive clause." They're generally regarded as a type of noun phrase, even though they can be restrictive or nonrestrictive like relative clauses.