

## Grammar Help Sheet: Phrases

A phrase is a group of two or more words, which act together as a unit in a sentence. A phrase cannot stand alone, like an independent clause or a sentence. In essence a phrase replaces a single word as one part of a sentence. It is used as a noun, verb, adjective, or adverb in the sentence. For example:

She sang softly.

She sang with a soft voice.

Grammatically the phrase “with a soft voice” has the same function as the one word “softly” - both are adverbial in the sentence, modifying the word “sang.”

She sang softly.

She could have sung softly.

“Could have sung” is a verb phrase having the same function as the single word “sang.”

Tennis is fun.

Playing a game of tennis is fun. “Playing a game of tennis” is a phrase used as a noun.

Phrases can be classified in two ways - by the way they are used in the sentence, and by the parts of speech that make up the phrase. Phrases here will be listed by the way they are used in the sentence.

### Verb Phrases

A verb phrase is really just a complex verb form. It consists of a main verb and one or more auxiliary verbs:

#### simple verb

She sang softly.

She reads often.

#### verb phrases

She could have sung softly.

Will you read tomorrow?

Note the special “two-verb combination” phrases made of an infinitive following certain auxiliaries like “have to,” “used to,” “am going to”:

I used to play football.

He was going to come by three o’clock.

## Noun Phrases

A noun phrase is a phrase used as a noun. There are two basic types of phrases used as nouns - gerund phrases and infinitive phrases.

A gerund (or “verbal noun”) is the -ing form of a verb when it is used as a noun. Gerunds by themselves and gerund phrases can be used any way a noun can.

### Gerund phrases used as noun subjects of verbs

Spending money never takes long.

Good acting is hard to find these days.

### Gerund phrases used as direct objects of verbs

I enjoy spending money.

The sign forbids walking on the grass.

### Gerund phrases used as objects of prepositions

I know many ways of spending money.

He saved the swimmer from drowning in the sea.

Infinitives can be used like nouns as subjects, direct objects, or predicate nouns.

### Infinitive phrases used as subject of verbs

To retreat would be cowardly.

To err is human.

### Infinitive phrases used as direct objects of verbs

He refused to leave the building.

Ann forgot to call home at six o'clock.

### Infinitive phrases used as predicate nouns

The goal is to understand the lesson.

The aim of business is to make money.

Infinitives are not used as objects of prepositions.

Infinitives as subjects can be transformed into sentences where “it” becomes the subject, and the infinitive (the “logical” subject) becomes a kind of complement.

To err is human.

It is human to err.

This type of sentence always begins with “it” and a form of the verb “to be” (“is” “would be” etc.)

Special Note:

Do not confuse infinitives with prepositional phrases beginning with the preposition “to.”

He is going to quit.

“To quit” is an infinitive.

He is going to school.

“To school” is a prepositional phrase.



## Adjective Phrases

Adjective phrases modify nouns or words used as nouns. There are three types of phrases that act as adjectives - prepositional, participial, and infinitive phrases.

### Prepositional phrases as adjectives:

The sign on the pole said no parking.  
The phrase modifies “sign,” the subject of the sentence.

Walking on the grass is forbidden.  
The phrase modifies the gerund (verbal noun) “walking.”

### Participial phrases as adjectives:

A participle is the -ing or -ed form of the verb used as an adjective:

The man painting our house is a veteran.  
phrase modifies “man,” the noun, subject of sentence.

We saw a squirrel climbing a tree.  
phrase modifies “squirrel,” the noun, direct object of sentence.

Having applauded respectfully, the audience left the theater.  
participial phrase modifies “audience,” the subject.

### Infinitive phrases as adjectives:

They looked for a place to park.  
phrase modifies noun, object of preposition.

It is time to leave.  
phrase modifies noun, predicate adjective.

He gave me something to think about.  
phrase modifies pronoun, direct object.

## Adverbial Phrases

When a phrase modifies a verb, adverb, or adjective, it is an adverbial phrase. There are two main types - prepositional and infinitive.

### Prepositional phrases as adverbs:

I will work after school hours.

phrases modify verbs. She was born in

Michigan.

The dog squeezed through the hole in the fence.

Marletta is angry at me.

phrases modify predicate adjectives.

We hope you are satisfied with the service.

### Infinitive phrases as adverbs:

John must work to learn French.

phrases modify the verbs  
in the sentences.

The other team really played to win.

He is eager to learn about phrases.

phrases modify adjectives. Her face is

impossible to forget.