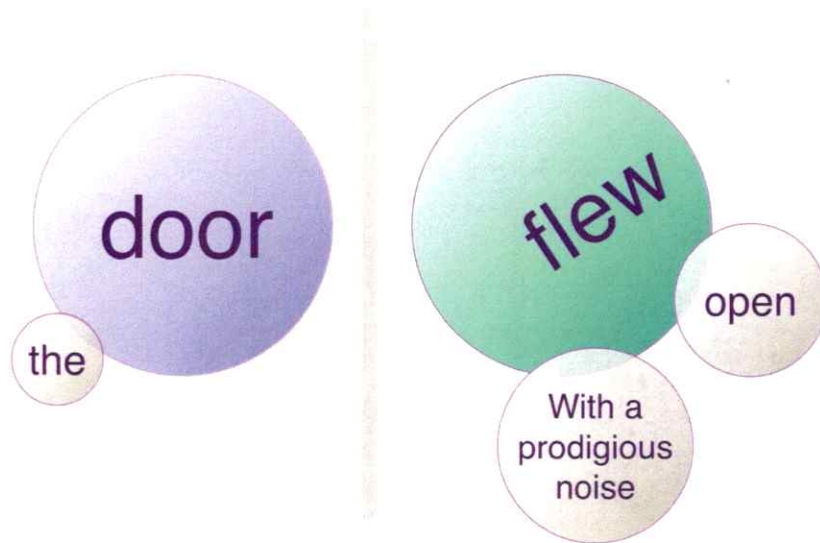


There are only five kinds of phrases that we will discuss, though the word *phrase* is sometimes used in additional ways (*verb phrase*, for example). The five kinds are the prepositional phrase, the appositive phrase, and the three kinds of verbal phrase.

Prepositional phrases: Prepositional phrases are the first phrases we learn. Prepositional phrases begin with prepositions (in the *pre* position); in other words, the preposition is the first word of the phrase: *to the moon*. The preposition shows a relationship between its object and some other word in the sentence, so if the sentence is “The conclusion *of the novel* was sad,” then the preposition *of* shows the possessive relationship between its object *novel* and the noun *conclusion*. A prepositional phrase might have only two words, such as *for me* or *to Kansas*, but it can also have many words: *for a completely convincing response*. Taken as a whole, a prepositional phrase acts as a modifier; that is, it acts as an adjective or an adverb. Here is a sentence from Herman Melville’s great novel *Moby Dick* in which the prepositional phrase acts as an adverb to modify the verb: “With a prodigious noise the door flew open.”



Notice that although the phrase modifies the verb, it comes at the beginning of the sentence. This is a common structure. Prepositional phrases that act as adjectives to modify nouns come right after the nouns they modify. In most cases it is easy to work out the meaning to determine what word the phrase modifies.

Appositive phrases: An appositive phrase is an interrupting definition enclosed in commas: “Linus Pauling, *the Nobel Prize recipient*, arrived late last night.” Appositives are called appositives because they are apposed—put beside—what they define. Appositive phrases give us an elegant and powerful way to clear away confusion by immediately identifying any person or term that might be unknown, rather than waiting until a later sentence to provide a definition. This efficient elegance makes appositive phrases the preferred choice for good style in writing. Here are some examples; please notice the commas:

Frances Crick, **the eminent biologist**, disagreed vociferously.

Punctuated equilibrium, **Gould’s theory**, was not unanimously accepted.

Assonance, **vowel repetition**, enriched the sound of the sentence.

Wellington, **New Zealand’s capital**, was their first destination.

Appositive phrases appear immediately after the nouns that they define, and they typically contain a noun and attendant words. The standard explanation of appositive phrases is that they act like nouns, simply renaming the noun they define. They also at times seem to act like adjectives, changing what one assumed about the noun they define, but this is not the main line of interpretation.

In the sentence “Mary Ann Evans, the English novelist, wrote *Middlemarch* under a pseudonym,” *the English novelist* is an appositive phrase that defines the brilliant novelist George Eliot, whose real name was Mary Ann Evans. She wrote *Silas Marner*, *Adam Bede*, *The Mill on the Floss*, *Daniel Deronda*, and other novels.

