

Prepositional phrases and appositive phrases are nice enough, but if you want rare birds, look at verbal phrases. Verbal phrases are like Tom Sawyer—creative and full of hijinks. There are three kinds, based on three verbals: gerunds, participles, and infinitives.

Those are three big-wig, high-falutin words for verbs in disguise. You could use those words for self-protection—like when someone wanted to steal your hat, you could shout “GERUND!” and they’d take off. Verbals are verbs posing as nouns or adjectives, most of the time. A gerund is a verb with an *-ing* ending pretending to be a noun, hoping no one will notice. Like if I said, “Chasing the chicken was Fido’s favorite sport.” The gerund phrase would be *Chasing the chicken*, with *Chasing* as the gerund. The real verb in the sentence is *was*, and the subject of *was* is the gerund phrase *Chasing the chicken*.

A participle is a verb talking like an adjective. If I said, “The whining boy sauntered down the lane, the jam still sticky on his face,” the participle would be *whining*. *Whining boy*—a verb used as an adjective to modify a noun. Using a verb as an adjective is like painting a fence with a cat’s tail; it’s not a brush, but you could use it as one. The cat would hate it. Cats are fastidious, which is just another way of saying that they are not dogs. A common participial situation is the introductory participial phrase: “*Chasing the odious cat*, the furious duck squawked and hissed.”

Infinitives are the basic verb forms, like *to squawk* or *to squeak*. If I said, “The mouse liked *to squeak a warning* when the cat entered the room,” then *to squeak a warning* would be an infinitive phrase acting as a direct object. This would irritate the cat and require a level of awareness uncommon to the mice we know.

In general, if anything is general, the phrases show that we’re smart enough to make fancy things. We can take a bucket of verbs and make them into nouns or adjectives, and no one raises a fuss. Except chickens.