



WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW?

PHRASES 1

Phrases are groups of connected words (or a single word in a sentence that could have others added to it) that function as a grammatical unit.

Noun phrases are made up of a head noun by itself, or with pre- or post- modifiers. **Verb phrases** are made up of a lexical verb by itself or with supporting auxiliaries that come before it. These are the most commonly occurring phrases.

Noun phrases

a noun and any associated modifiers e.g. the apple, the fresh apple, the rotten apple, the apple that fell from the tree.

What is distinctive about noun phrases?

- simple** noun phrases have a head word (a noun or a pronoun – sometimes an adjective) or a determiner + head word
e.g. London, she, my teacher, a child, one cave, the beautiful, the old
- complex** noun phrases can have **pre-modifiers** (adjectives, nouns, or verb modifiers)
e.g. a **sunny** day (Adj), a **beach** day (N), a **ruined** day (-ed verb), a **working** day (-ing verb)
OR **post-modifiers** (prepositional phrases, relative clauses, non-finite clauses or *that* noun clauses – the first word signposts the form)
e.g. the boat **with a blue sail** (preposition = PrepP)
the man **who sells wood** (relative pronoun = RelCl),
the tree **bending in the wind** (-ing participle= NFCl),
the lie **told by my friend** (-ed participle = NFCl)
the fact **that we were lost** (*that* = NCl)
- noun phrases can function as the **subject** or the **object** of a sentence.
e.g. [A mood of despair] filled [the empty room].
subject object

Where do we find them?

Noun phrases are used frequently in all kinds of texts. In poetry, they often function as grammatically incomplete sentences, focusing attention on key semantic elements. In descriptive writing (e.g. blogs, novels, travel writing, articles), they build mood, provide visual detail and communicate attitude. In speeches, they establish the topic and communicate the message.

Verb phrases

a verb or group of verbs that express physical/mental action

e.g. to fly, to work, to see, to think or a state of being
e.g. to be, to appear, to become, to seem.

What is distinctive about verb phrases?

- they are marked for **tense**
e.g. visit/visits (present), visited (past)
- they are **active** or **passive** (*be* + -ed participle)
e.g. I booked a ticket; we caught the dog (active)
A ticket was booked; the dog was caught (passive)
- they can be **progressive** (*be* + -ing participle) to show on-going action or **perfective** (*have* + -ed participle) to show action in the past with current relevance
e.g. He is cooking the meal (progressive)
He has cooked the meal (perfective)
- they can be **modal** (can, could, shall, should, must, will, would, may, might) to create shades of meaning.
e.g. He may cook. He must cook. He can cook
- they can have different grammatical moods: **declarative** (statement), **interrogative** (question) or **imperative** (command)
e.g. The girl ran. Run! Did you run?

Where do we find them?

Every grammatically complete sentence has a verb phrase. Commentaries use present tense verb phrases, novels past tense. Instruction texts use imperative verb phrases, a report declarative. Science textbooks use the passive because the subject is not important, news reports because the subject may be unknown. Modal verbs help speakers/writers to be polite, or to be authoritative.

Sample analysis: extract from a children's history book

The simple noun phrases in the opening sentence quickly establish the period ("the 1660s"), the location ("Port Royal") and the theme ("its lawlessness") for the target audience. The heads of the noun phrases in the second sentence describe the inhabitants and the modification creates visual images that will appeal to children. High frequency adjectives build the atmosphere ("smelly") and characterise the pirates ("cruel"), while prepositional post-modification adds detail ("with squawking parrots"). As would be expected in a history book, there are past tense verb phrases ("became"). The writer uses a passive verb phrase ("were filled with") to move the subject – the syndetic list of noun phrases – to the end of the sentence, making it more readable.

In **the 1660s** **Port Royal** **became** famous for **its lawlessness**. **The smelly streets of the port** **were filled with drunken merchants, cruel slave traders, sailors with squawking parrots, gamblers and rogues, and swaggering buccaneers.**