



The Writing Center

UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO
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Adjectivals: The Describing Tool

While adjectives and adjectivals both modify a noun or noun phrase, adjectivals can offer more detailed descriptions of persons or things where a single describing word may be insufficient. Using adjectivals, writers can show instead of tell by more precisely describing a subject or object. There are three common types of adjectivals:

1. Appositives
2. Participial Phrases
3. Absolute Phrases

This handout will examine each adjectival and how they modify a base sentence. With the addition of each adjectival, notice how resulting sentences become complex, interesting and detailed. The base sentence for this handout is “Walt Whitman celebrated nature.”

1. Appositives:

Comprised of a noun or noun phrase, an appositive directly precedes or follows the noun or noun phrase it modifies. An appositive can further elaborate on, categorize or describe something or someone.

An ascetic and nonconformist, Walt Whitman celebrated nature.

“An ascetic and nonconformist” provides further elaboration about and categorizes Walt Whitman.

You can also use appositives mid-sentence by inserting them after the noun and surrounded by commas:

Walt Whitman, **an ascetic and nonconformist**, celebrated nature.

Because an appositive is a noun/noun phrase, substituting it for the person or thing it modifies can help identify an appositive and be sure you are using it correctly.

An ascetic and nonconformist ~~Walt Whitman~~ celebrated nature.
~~Walt Whitman~~, **an ascetic and nonconformist**, celebrated nature.

Though not as complex as the first sentences, the second sentences are grammatically correct; thus, the noun phrase is an appositive.

2. Participial Phrases:

Always comprised of participles (the -ing or -ed form of a verb), participial phrases add more detail about actions or states of being: what the modified noun or pronoun is doing.

Participial phrases can be used in three different patterns, all requiring different punctuation. Those patterns are:

- 1) Participial Phrase + , + Sentence

Traveling throughout America, Walt Whitman celebrated nature.

Here, the focus is on the action (to travel) that Walt Whitman performed.

- 2) Sentence + Participial Phrase

Walt Whitman celebrated nature **existing in all its wondrous beauty.**

When the participial phrase concludes the main clause and modifies a noun at the end of the main clause, **no comma is required.**

- 3) Sentence + , + Participial Phrase

Walt Whitman celebrated nature, **writing poems about the beauty of the American countryside.**

Here, the participial phrase comes at the end of the main clause but refers back to a noun given earlier in the clause.

3. Absolute Phrases:

Absolutes zoom-in on a specific part of the sentence they modify. Think of it visually: absolute phrases function like a camera, urging readers to focus on a significant detail.

To create an absolute phrase, start with a possessive pronoun (his, her, their, our, etc.), connect it to a noun or noun phrase, conjugate it with the verb “was” or “were,” and then complete the sentence. In the following example, “his” is the possessive pronoun, “metaphors” is the noun, and “were” is the verb:

His metaphors were filled with imagery of the countryside.

Then drop the “were” or “was” and attach the absolute to your sentence:

Walt Whitman celebrated nature, **his metaphors filled with imagery of the countryside.**

Notice that the absolute phrase is always set off from the main clause with commas because the information contained in the absolute is helpful but not necessary information. For this same reason, the absolute phrase can be moved to the beginning, the middle, or the end of the sentence. Commas are used to distinguish between absolutes and the necessary elements of independent clauses:

His poems often focusing on the subtle beauty of the world surrounding him, Walt Whitman celebrated nature.

Walt Whitman, **his poems often focusing on the subtle beauty of the world surrounding him,** celebrated nature.

Walt Whitman celebrated nature, **his poems often focusing on the subtle beauty of the world surrounding him.**