

ABSOLUTE

Definition: an absolute is a free modifier (a descriptive phrase that requires punctuation and can be found at the beginning (initial), middle (medial) or end (final) of a main or base clause; it is composed of a noun and another free modifier. Because it has two parts it can be confused with a sentence. Notice the similarity of structure:

Sentence: Her hands were tightly clasped.

Absolute: Her hands tightly clasped.

As you can see, the first part of both the sentence and the absolute are identical. But the second parts are not the same; the sentence has an extra word. This extra word is an auxiliary verb (sometimes called a helping verb).

Practice: Underline the two parts of each sentence and circle the auxiliary verbs (is, are, was, were).

Example : The bolts **were** rusted through. [The auxiliary verb is bold-faced here.]

1. His eyes were following the suspicious-looking men.
2. The books were thrown on the floor.
3. The tendons in his hand were taut.
4. The picture on the far wall was tilted at a crazy angle.
5. The students are upset and nervous.

As we saw before, the absolute is often a sentence **minus** the auxiliary verb.

The first sentence in the **Practice** above can be converted into an absolute by **removing** the auxiliary verb:

1. His eyes following the suspicious-looking men.

If it sounds incomplete to you, replace the verb *were* and notice how it once again sounds as though it can stand alone. For the sake of practice, convert the remaining four sentences into absolutes:

- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

In each case you should have removed the circled auxiliary verb.

The absolute is incomplete, as you have seen. But remember that the absolute is a free modifier, a punctuated addition to the base or main clause. Furthermore, the practice up to this point is intended only to show the components of an absolute.

WARNING: An absolute is a free modifier (composed of a noun plus any other free modifier). An absolute cannot be punctuated as a sentence; to do so will result in a fragment. So, experiment with absolutes, but be sure they modify a base clause.

When you create your own absolutes, you will not be writing sentences, only removing the auxiliary verb. You will simply combine a noun (or noun phrase) with any of the free modifiers.

NOUN	FREE MODIFIER
his eyes	following the suspicious-looking men

In the above absolute, the free modifier is a present participle verb phrase ("ing" verb).

The absolute is a creative device, useful in a number of writing situations. First, the absolute allows you to bring two closely related ideas into close proximity, causing the writing to flow more smoothly and clearly. Second, the use of the absolute reduces the number of words (no auxiliary verb). Third, to think absolute is to generate more ideas about some image in the base clause. As you write, ask yourself the following questions:

1. Can I reduce wordiness by using an absolute?
2. Can I improve the readability (short, choppy or disconnected sentences) by using an absolute?
3. Can I say more about my subject by adding an absolute?

Let's follow the case history of an absolute. First we create the **base or main clause**:

John was sitting at the table in the corner.

Because we want to say more about John, we will **focus in on some part or component** of him. Let's assume we are interested in the movement of his eyes:

John was sitting at the table in the corner, his eyes

Now let's **add the second part of the absolute**, which in this case is going to be a present participle verb-phrase:

John was sitting at the table in the corner, his eyes following the suspicious-looking men.

Practice Exercises

Separate the two parts of the absolute in the sentence and circle the image (noun) in the base clause that generates (or connects to) the noun (or first part) of the absolute.

Example: **Hank Stimpson** sat away from the crowd, his hands tightly clenched around his glass. [Image is in bold-face for the example]

1. The wildlife was threatened, the whooping cranes reduced to only forty-six survivors.
2. She walked up to him slowly, her dress flowing with her soft movement.
3. Henry Winkler stood before the crowd, his clean white t-shirt tight against his body.
4. The textbook is easy to follow, the chapters arranged in order of difficulty.
5. Sherri has just returned from Spring Break, her skin a deep brown, and her hair bleached blonde.