

# The Absolute Phrase in Contemporary English

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## An Introduction

Although there are many questions that can productively be asked about the absolute phrase (also known as the *nominative absolute* and, in England, as the *absolute clause*), the basic questions are simple: What is an absolute phrase, and how frequently does it turn up in modern spoken and written English? In other contexts it would be important to move from these basic questions to other ones, questions about the uses, purposes, meanings, and effects of this phrase. In this brief overview of the absolute phrase, I will devote myself mainly to the first two questions – the nature and the frequency of these phrases – but I will also attend briefly to the various uses and effects of this grammatical structure in contemporary spoken and written English.

## I. The Nature and Varieties of the Absolute Phrase

Part of the difficulty of describing and counting absolute phrases is the apparent complexity of the structure itself. It is typically defined as *a phrasal unit made up of a noun followed by a non-finite verb*, specifically, a present or past participle. The absolute phrase itself is considered to have no grammatical relationship to any part of the clause it belongs to (thus the name “absolute”); alternatively, the phrase is considered to function as an adverbial modifying the entire clause it belongs to, but not any particular word or phrase in that clause.

The structure of the absolute phrase can be readily understood in its many varieties if it is seen as a reduced or compressed version of a full clause, a reduced version in which the finite form of the verb has been changed to a non-finite form. In *Appendix A*, I have provided a fuller picture of the many grammatical structures from which the absolute can be derived. For the purposes of this discussion, I have limited myself to the use of four broad grammatical patterns that illustrate the forms of this structure quite well. (Note: In *Appendix B*, I have summarized the absolutes extracted from the ICE-GB by placing them into the four grammatical categories described here.) The subject of the clause is identical to the main noun in the absolute phrase, but that noun is (typically) followed by a non-finite form of the verb, in a variety of tenses. However, if the verb is (or if its auxiliary includes) a form of the verb “to be,” the “to-be” verb form itself is regularly omitted. In what follows, I indicate the dropped “to be” verb form with the null symbol ( $\emptyset$ ).

#### A. The Absolute Phrase: Description by General Verb Type

##### 1. Non-“to be” version:

- a. The test had started. We took our seats.
- b. The test *having* started. We took our seats.
- c. *The test having started*, we took our seats.

##### 2. “To be” version:

- a. My neighbor found three of the chairs. One of them was nearly shattered.
- b. My neighbor found three of the chairs. One of them *having been* nearly shattered.
- c. My neighbor found three of the chairs, *one of them*  $\emptyset$  *nearly shattered*.

##### 3. The optional introductory “with” (both “to be” and non-“to be” versions)

- a. Her head was held high. She walked across the lobby and out the door.
- b. (With) her head *having been* held high. She walked across the lobby and out the door.
- c. *With her head*  $\emptyset$  *held high*, she walked across the lobby and out the door.

#### B. Absolute Phrases by Verb + Complement Type:

1. Intransitive Verb (non-linking): He sat quietly in the room, *his hands resting in his lap*.

2. Linking Verb: *All things being equal*, Mondays can be very energizing.
3. Trans. Verb/Active Voice: She walked away, *her hair catching the morning light*.
4. Trans. Verb/Passive Voice: *His face distorted by pain*, he left the room quickly.

## II. Kortmann (1991): Absolute Phrases in Written and Spoken English

Quirk et alia (1985) claimed that, "apart from stereotyped phrases, absolute clauses are formal and infrequent." But what counts as "formal"? And what counts as "infrequent"? These questions are difficult to answer, but at least one study has examined absolute phrases in such a way that it is possible to have a more nuanced sense of their register and frequency.

Bernd Kortmann (1991) studied a corpus of spoken and written English for the analysis that constitutes the core material of his *Free Adjuncts and Absolutes in English*. For that study, Kortmann assembled a corpus from four sources: several works of fiction (150,000 words), newspaper writing (100,000 words), science writing (50,000 words), and a corpus of spoken English of approximately 150,000 words.

His analysis yielded 269 absolute phrases in a corpus of 450,000 words, for an average of nearly 600 absolute phrases per 1,000,000 words. But 600 absolutes per 1,000,000 words can be quite a misleading figure, since the number of absolutes in his study varied so greatly by genre. Kortmann's analysis by genre is as follows:

Table 1: *Absolutes in Kortmann (1991)*

Genre	# of Words	Absolutes
Fiction	(150,000)	157
News	(100,000)	50
Science	(50,000)	20
Spoken	(150,000)	42
Total	(450,000):	269

And the number of absolutes per 1,000,000 words in each genre would be as follows (my extrapolation):

Table 2: *Absolutes per million words, extrapolated from Kortmann study (1991)*

Genre	Absolutes per million words
Fiction	1050
News	500
Science	400
Spoken	280

It is important to note here that Kortmann's study does not indicate how many of the absolutes found in his corpora were of the stereotyped variety. But in my examination of more than a dozen stereotyped absolute phrases appearing in three large corpora, it seems likely that such absolutes make up no more than from 5 to 9 phrases per million words (see III, below). If that is the case, Kortmann's study does provide a useful benchmark for the study of absolutes in various genres of contemporary English. The fact that absolutes in his study turn up most frequently in fiction and least frequently in spoken English allows at least the speculative observation that absolutes are far more common in planned and edited writing than in spontaneous speech, and that absolute phrases are much more common in fiction than in other kinds of prose.

### III. Corpus Studies: Stereotyped Absolutes

What Quirk et alia refer to as stereotyped absolutes are such expressions as "all things considered" and "God willing," absolute phrases that always take the same form. In my search of three large corpora—the British National Corpus, or BNC (100 million words, 1980s-1993), the Corpus of Contemporary American English, or COCA (385 million words, 1990-2008), and the Time Corpus, or TIME (100 million words, 1923-2006)—I found the following stereotyped absolutes:

Stereotyped Absolutes, per 100 million words <sup>1</sup>	BNC	COCA	TIME
That said	140	273	76
All told	65	169	640
Other things being equal	65	22	7
Weather permitting	55	29	30
All things considered	33	57	57
God willing	30	55	40
This being the case	25	13	7
All other things being equal	23	20	7

## The Absolute Phrase in Contemporary English

JAMES VANDEN BOSCH

<b>Stereotyped Absolutes, per 100 million words<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>BNC</b>	<b>COCA</b>	<b>TIME</b>
That being the case	20	30	26
All things being equal	15	23	6
That being said	13	36	2
This said	12	13	3
That having been said	3	8	0
Present company excepted	3	2	0
Time permitting	2	3	0
Lord willing	1	2	2
There being no doubt	1	0	0
<i>Totals</i>	<i>506</i>	<i>755</i>	<i>903</i>

<sup>1</sup> These large corpora represent three quite different data sets. The BNC is a closed corpus from the 80s and into the early 90s in Great Britain; the COCA is a much larger and continuously growing American English corpus with texts taken from 1990 to the present; and the *TIME magazine* corpus is limited to text from that American popular news magazine between 1923 and 2006.

—suggesting a range of 5 to 9 stereotyped absolutes per million words in these three corpora.

### IV. Corpus Studies: Formulaic Absolutes

In addition to stereotyped absolutes, I have also identified a good number of what I am referring to here as formulaic absolutes; these are found almost entirely in fiction texts. In such absolutes, there is a core element that stays the same: “Her face a ...”. But writers show considerable variety in the completion of such phrases. What follows is a sample from COCA in 1990: “her face a map of sorrow”; “her face a suffused mask of agony”; and “her face a child’s mask of disappointment”. These formulaic absolutes are not as frequent as the stereotyped variety, but they are quite common in print and are readily recognizable:

<b>Formulaic Absolutes, per 100 million words</b>	<b>BNC</b>	<b>COCA</b>	<b>TIME</b>
Her face a	10	56	1
His face a	31	61	33
Her hair a	12	38	2
His hair a	3	12	4
There being no	64	15	32

<b>Formulaic Absolutes, per 100 million words</b>	<b>BNC</b>	<b>COCA</b>	<b>TIME</b>
There having been no	0	0	2
<i>Totals</i>	<i>120</i>	<i>182</i>	<i>74</i>

– suggesting a range of 1 to 2 formulaic absolutes per million words in these three corpora, although almost all of them come from one genre, fiction.

### V. Corpus Studies: Absolute Phrases by Genre

Nelleke Oostdijk (Nijmegen) devised and ran several extraction formulas for me, using the *ICE-GB* as the corpus to test. I studied the materials pulled from this corpus by means of these extraction formulas and identified 275 absolute phrases in that million-word corpus of spoken and written English. Here is a graphic summary of the absolutes I found in that corpus:

<b>ICE-GB Categories</b>	<b>ICE-GB Absolutes Phrases</b>				<b>Totals</b>	<b>per million words</b>
	<b>Extr. 1</b>	<b>Extr. 2</b>	<b>Extr. 3</b>	<b>Extr. 4</b>		
		<b>("with")</b>		<b>("with")</b>		
<i>SPOKEN: 600,000 words, total</i>						
Conversations (180,000 words)	1	1	2	1	5	28
Phone calls (20,000)	0	0	1	0	1	50
Class lessons (40,000)	0	2	3	2	7	175
Broadcast discussions (40,000)	0	1	1	2	4	100
Broadcast interviews (20,000)	0	0	1	0	1	50
Parliamentary debates (20,000)	0	0	0	0	0	0
Cross-examinations (20,000)	0	0	1	3	4	200
Business transactions (20,000)	0	0	2	1	3	150
Commentaries (40,000)	1	5	4	4	14	350
Unscripted speeches (60,000)	1	3	6	1	11	183
Demonstrations (20,000)	3	1	1	2	7	350
Legal presentations (20,000)	0	0	1	1	2	100
Broadcast news (40,000)	1	3	2	15	21	525
Broadcast talks (40,000)	0	0	2	3	5	125
Non-broadcast talks (20,000)	0	0	1	2	3	150
Subtotals, by Extr. Formula	7	16	28	37	88	
<i>WRITTEN: 400,000 words, total</i>						
Student essays (20,000)	0	0	4	3	7	350

*The Absolute Phrase in Contemporary English*

JAMES VANDEN BOSCH

**ICE-GB Absolutes Phrases**

<b>ICE-GB Categories</b>	<b>Extr. 1</b>	<b>Extr. 2 ("with")</b>	<b>Extr. 3</b>	<b>Extr. 4 ("with")</b>	<b>Totals</b>	<b>per mil- lion words</b>
<i>SPOKEN: 600,000 words, total</i>						
Exam scripts (20,000)	2	0	2	2	6	300
Social letters (30,000)	2	1	5	5	13	433
Business letters (30,000)	0	2	1	1	4	133
Acad: Humanities (20,000)	3	1	3	0	7	350
Acad: Social sciences (20,000)	0	0	0	3	3	150
Acad: Natural sciences (20,000)	0	0	2	2	4	200
Acad: Technology (20,000)	0	1	3	2	6	300
Pop: Humanities (20,000)	0	2	9	3	14	700
Pop: Social sciences (20,000)	0	1	1	4	6	300
Pop: Natural sciences (20,000)	0	0	3	6	9	450
Pop: Technology (20,000)	0	5	8	8	21	1050
Press reports (40,000)	2	7	3	16	28	700
Administrative writing (20,000)	0	0	1	1	2	100
Skills/hobbies (20,000)	0	3	2	3	8	400
Editorials (20,000)	1	1	2	2	6	300
Novels (40,000)	4	1	33	5	43	1075
<i>Subtotals, by Extr. Formula</i>	<i>14</i>	<i>25</i>	<i>82</i>	<i>66</i>	<i>187</i>	
<i>Totals, by Extr. Formula</i>	<i>21</i>	<i>41</i>	<i>110</i>	<i>103</i>	<i>275</i>	

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It is clear from this graph that more corpus study must be done to put these numbers in perspective—275 absolute phrases in a million-word corpus does not constitute substantial evidence of the use and distribution of spoken and written absolutes in modern English. It is, by current standards, a small corpus, and it is limited to British English of 1990 through 1993. But it does provide a glimpse of where and how often this construction appears in the texts that make up this corpus. It is, for example, more common to find the absolute construction in the written than in the spoken part of the corpus. The absolute phrase turns up, as I noted with the Kortmann material, above, more often in planned and edited writing than in spontaneous speech. Elmore Leonard, for example, is a devoted disciple of the absolute phrase in fiction; here is the first sentence of the first chapter of *Mr. Paradise*, a novel he published in 2004:

Late afternoon Chloe and Kelly were having cocktails at the Rattlesnake Club, **the two seated on the far side of the dining room by themselves: Chloe talking, Kelly listening, Chloe trying to get Kelly to help her entertain Anthony Paradiso**, an eighty-four-year-old guy who was paying her five thousand a week to be his girlfriend.

The absolute phrase is most common in novels and in popular writing on technological subjects, but it is also quite common in popular writing in the humanities as well as in broadcast news, a form of spoken English that is largely scripted.

### V. Absolute Phrases as Sentence Fragments

One of the surprises of this research has been my discovery of the absolute phrase in the form of a sentence fragment, that is, an absolute phrase punctuated as if it were a complete sentence. In my studies, I have found such fragments in many places, ranging from popular song lyrics and novels to television news broadcasts in the United States.

There is a striking example of such fragments in the first two stanzas of the title song (“Long Road out of Eden”) of an album by a popular American band, the Eagles, released in 2007:

Moon shining down through the palms.  
Shadows moving on the sand.  
Somebody whispering the twenty-third psalm.  
Dusty rifle in his trembling hands.  
Somebody trying just to stay alive.  
He got promises to keep.  
Over the ocean in America,  
Far away and fast asleep.

Silent stars blinking in the blackness of an endless sky.  
Cold silver satellites, ghostly caravans passing by.  
Galaxies unfolding; new worlds being born.  
Pilgrims and prodigals creeping toward the dawn,  
But it's a long road out of Eden.

In each of these stanzas there are five absolute phrases, and four of them are technically sentence fragments, unattached to an independent clause but punctuated as complete sentences.



Similarly, in the fiction of Cormac McCarthy, sentence fragments play a large role in his novels, a stylistic choice that slows down the narrative and names and catalogs the things that require the reader's closer attention. Here is a typical passage, taken from the first paragraph of McCarthy's *The Road*; in it, I have put in bold all of the sentence fragments, and I have placed square brackets around the absolute phrase fragments:

When he woke in the woods in the dark and the cold of the night he'd reach out to touch the child sleeping beside him. [**Nights dark beyond darkness and the days more gray each one than what had gone before.**] **Like the onset of some cold glaucoma dimming away the world.** His hand rose and fell softly with each precious breath. He pushed away the plastic tarpaulin and raised himself in the stinking robes and blankets and looked toward the east for any light but there was none. In the dream from which he'd awakened he had wandered in a cave where the child led him by the hand. [**Their light playing over the wet flowstone walls.**] **Like pilgrims in a fable swallowed up and lost among the inward parts of some granitic beast. Deep stone flues where the water dripped and sang. Tolling in the silence the minutes of the earth and the hours and the days of it and the years without cease. Until they stood in a great stone room where lay a black and ancient lake. And on the far shore a creature that raised its dripping mouth from the rimstone pool and stared into the light with eyes dead white and sightless as the eggs of spiders.** It swung its head low over the water as if to take the scent of what it could not see. **Crouching there pale and naked and translucent, [its alabaster bones cast up in shadow on the rocks behind it.] Its bowels, its beating heart. The brain that pulsed in a dull glass bell.** It swung its head from side to side and then gave out a low moan and turned and lurched away and loped soundlessly into the dark.

In this passage, McCarthy uses sentence fragments very deliberately, to slow down and punctuate his narrative, using noun phrases and absolute phrases to catalog the features of the fictional world that most call out for the reader's attention.

But it is in the *NBC Nightly News* broadcast that the use of the absolute fragment has become something very much like a house style, as I have reported in these pages (*Stylistyka: Stylistics and Poetics* XI (2002): 315-323: "Sentence Fragments in the *NBC Nightly News*: A Grammatical Analysis"). Although this use of the absolute fragment has found its way into other American news broadcasts as well, at NBC this use of the absolute fragment accounts for nearly half of the fragments used in the sample I studied in 2000.

## VI. Tentative Conclusion

We are now in a position to find and understand the absolute phrase more accurately and fully than has been possible before. Like the ICE-GB, other POS-tagged

corpora will give us increasingly good data to work with as we work to determine the relative frequency of the absolute construction in spoken and written English in various places and times. Whether we are interested in the absolute phrase in general, or in its stereotyped and formulaic versions, or in its use as a sentence fragment, we have the corpora and the tools that make it relatively easy to find what we are looking for. With these tools, we should also be able to describe how its use has changed over time. We are also much better equipped to note the most common versions of the grammar of the absolute phrase, as well as its position in sentences, narratives, and news broadcasting. All things considered, this is a very good moment to be interested in absolute phrases.

### **Appendix A: The Internal Grammatical Structure of the Absolute Phrase**

Generally, the absolute phrase maintains the internal grammatical features of the basic pattern of the clause. The absolute phrase regularly displays the grammatical structure of the corresponding sentence form; note the absolute phrase version following each sentence form, below. In each pair, I have italicized the non-finite form of the verb in the absolute phrase.

#### **A. Subject–Intransitive Verb:**

- a. Full clause: His head was in the clouds.
- b. Absolute phrase: His head *having been* in the clouds, **or** His head  $\emptyset$  in the clouds.

#### **B. Expletive–Intransitive Verb—Subject**

- a. There were no students in the room.
- b. There *having been* no students in the room, **or** No students *being* in the room, **or** No students  $\emptyset$  in the room. (Note that the expletive can be deleted in this structure, along with the participial form of the “to be” verb.)

#### **C. Subject–Linking Verb–Subjective Complement (Noun):**

- a. Her face is a mask.
- b. Her face *being* a mask, **or** Her face  $\emptyset$  a mask.

#### **D. Subject–Linking Verb–Subjective Complement (Adjective):**

- a. His eyes were dull with sleep.  
b. His eyes *having been* dull with sleep, **or** His eyes  $\emptyset$  dull with sleep.
- E. Subject—Transitive Verb—Direct Object:  
a. My neighbor tethered the dog again.  
b. My neighbor *having tethered* the dog again.
- F. Subject—Transitive Verb—Indirect Object—Direct Object:  
a. Betsy gives Jill the benefit of the doubt.  
b. Betsy *giving* Jill the benefit of the doubt.
- G. Subject—Transitive Verb—Direct Object—Objective Complement (Noun):  
a. Jill considers Betsy her best friend.  
b. Jill *considering* Betsy her best friend.
- H. Subject—Transitive Verb—Direct Object—Objective Complement (Adjective):  
a. Betsy considered Jill intelligent.  
b. Betsy *having considered* Jill intelligent.
- I. Subject—Passive-Voice Verb (Passive version of E, above):  
a. The dog was tethered again (by my neighbor).  
b. The dog *having been tethered* again (by my neighbor), **or** The dog  $\emptyset$  *tethered* again (by my neighbor).
- J. Subject—Passive-Voice Verb—Retained Object (Passive version of F, above):  
a. Jill is given the benefit of the doubt (by Betsy) **or**  
The benefit of the doubt is given Jill (by Betsy).  
b. Jill *being given* the benefit of the doubt (by Betsy) **or**  
The benefit of the doubt *being given* Jill (by Betsy).
- K. Subject—Passive-Voice Verb—Retained Object (Passive version of G, above):

- a. Betsy is considered her best friend (by Jill).
- b. Betsy *being considered* her best friend (by Jill).

L. Subject—Passive-Voice Verb—Retained Object (Passive version of H, above):

- a. Jill was considered intelligent (by Betsy).
- b. Jill *having been considered* intelligent (by Betsy).

One last note on variety: The absolute phrase is also commonly introduced by the word “with”; when used in this way, “with” is not a preposition. It is almost always the case that the “with” can be omitted without affecting the grammaticality of the absolute phrase:

- She left the room *with her head held high*, or
- She left the room, *her head held high*.

**Appendix B.**

**ICE-GB Absolutes: Absolute Phrases by Grammatical Structure**

	Spoken	Written	Total
1. Intransitive Verb, Non-Linking:	29	68	97
• Subset with “With” introductory word:	20	30	50
2. Intransitive Verb—Linking Verb:	16	22	38
• Subset with “With” introductory word:	4	3	7
3. Transitive Verb, Active Voice:	18	43	61
• Subset with “With” introductory word:	12	28	40
4. Transitive Verb, Passive Voice:	25	54	79
• Subset with “With” introductory word:	18	31	49

**Totals by +/- Subordinator “With”**

	Spoken + “With”	Spoken – “With”	Written + “With”	Written – “With”
	54	34	92	95
<i>Subtotals</i>		88	187	
<i>Total</i>	27		5	

## *The Absolute Phrase in Contemporary English*

JAMES VANDEN BOSCH

### Literature

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### *The Absolute Phrase in Contemporary English*

Until recently it has been difficult to obtain good information about the relative frequency of the absolute phrase in spoken and written English. With a POS-tagged corpus like the ICE-GB, however, it is possible to use extraction formulas to find absolute phrases in the ICE-GB, a million-word corpus of contemporary English. In this study, I describe the results of that corpus work, especially in terms of relative distribution by genre.

Keywords: *absolute phrase, absolute clause, nominative absolute, fixed absolutes, stereotyped absolutes, extraction formulas, tagged corpus, sentence fragments, syntax, relative frequency in spoken and written English, ICE-GB, POS-tagged corpus*