

# Sentence Fragments in the *NBC Nightly News*: A Grammatical Analysis

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For three nights in late November and early December 2000, I recorded the evening television broadcast of the *NBC Nightly News* program in order to study a representative sample of those broadcasts. I was motivated to make such a study because of my recurring and nagging awareness that TV reporters were employing sentence fragments in their reporting, and using them in strange and interesting ways. I found that the transcripts I assembled over those three nights were indeed riddled with sentence fragments, but the most common type of fragment that appeared in these transcripts – the absolute phrase – was what became most interesting for me<sup>1</sup>.

It would have been ideal to study the prepared scripts of the broadcasters themselves, but NBC never responded to my requests to provide transcripts from the reporters and announcers. I consulted the NBC Internet home page for the partial transcripts posted there in the days following each nightly broadcast, but the web version of these stories was often a highly edited and revised version of what had been broadcast on the *Nightly News* program.

I videotaped the *NBC Nightly News* broadcasts on three successive nights – Wednesday, November 29; Thursday, November 30; and Friday, December 1, 2000. After recording each broadcast, I prepared a typed version of the broadcast and then compared my typed version with the official transcript available through NBC and produced by Burrelle's Information Services. For the purposes of my

1 I presented an earlier version of this study at a conference on Language, the Media, and International Communication, at Oxford University, in April 2001.



analysis, I included in the transcripts only utterances from NBC reporters and announcers, excluding all text spoken by people interviewed or recorded for the broadcast who were not part of the NBC news-gathering and news-broadcasting team. I used the Burrelle transcripts primarily to ensure the accuracy of my sense of where the breaks between utterances came in the broadcasts; what seemed to me to be a full stop between utterances could be perceived by other listeners to be no more than a pause in a longer utterance. In cases in which my sense of a sentence unit differed from that of the Burrelle transcript, I changed my transcript to conform to the official transcript. Such instances were very few; the people who prepared the official transcripts of the broadcasts heard substantially the same sentences I heard during those three broadcasts.

It is part of the grammar and rhetoric of the nightly news broadcast in the United States to use sentence fragments as introductory headings, as hails and farewells between reporters and Tom Brokaw, the anchor of those broadcasts, as summary comments, and as transitions to other segments in the broadcast; I refer to such transitional fragments as segue fragments. I noted and counted all such fragments, but I did not include them in my count of sentence fragments proper. For that count, I restricted myself to non-transitional utterances presented as complete sentences but lacking grammatical completeness.

Sample Passages from NBC Nightly News, Wednesday, November 29, 2000 provide an example of the kind of analysis I engaged in<sup>2</sup>.

### Analysis

Segue fragment

Complete sentence

Fragment (absolute)

Segue fragment

### Transcript

#### **Tom Brokaw:**

1. Thanks very much—NBC's David Bloom tonight.
2. Over the course of the next two days, we'll be looking at a surreal highway scene, the likes of which we haven't seen since OJ Simpson's slow-speed chase in the white Bronco.
3. Tractor-trailer trucks full of ballots, heading north for what could be the final count.
4. More on that now from NBC's national correspondent, Jim Avila.

2 Personal transcript, JVB.



- Jim Avila:**
- Segue fragment 5. Packing day in Miami.
- Fragment (absolute) 6. Every vote cast, nearly 700,000 here, plus another 460,000 from nearby Palm Beach County, now ordered on a cross-state, 500-mile trip north, to Tallahassee.
- Fragment (absolute) 7. An unprecedented SWAT-team-guarded caravan, leaving this garage at Palm Beach at dawn tomorrow, Friday, from Miami, on a ten-hour trek for what could be the final count in court.
- Fragment (prep. Phrase) 8. From Miami, nearly 700,000 total ballots cast, 10,750 in dispute.
- Complete sentence 9. The Gore campaign predicts 600 new Gore votes can be found here if the court orders them recounted.
- Fragment (prep. Phrase) 10. From Palm Beach, 462,000 total ballots, 3300 undervotes in dispute.
- Complete sentence 11. The Gore observers contend 832 dimpled ballots should have been counted with the undervotes.
- Complete sentence 12. Both parties will have observers inside the police caravan.
- Complete sentence 13. The Republicans continue to be concerned about damage to the ballots.
- Complete sentence 14. But the first independent observers to see those ballots up close say the only damage seems to be coming from the voters.
- Complete sentence 15. Close-up views of the disputed ballots show what the judge could see Saturday: a Bush vote, punch number 3, chad fully removed; a Gore vote, punch number 5, chad fully removed; and the undervote, no mark showing.
- Fragment (absolute) 16. More than a million cardboard punch cards under lock and key tonight before the long journey to what could be the ultimate count.
- Segue fragment 17. Jim Avila, NBC News, Palm Beach.



**Tom Brokaw:**

- Segue fragment 18. Now LifeLine.
- Fragment (noun phrase) 19. Tonight, new hope for people suffering from asthma and allergy.
- Complete sentence 20. These conditions are reaching epidemic proportions, with asthma sending more than a half million Americans to the hospital every year.
- Complete sentence 21. But some low-tech and inexpensive relief could be in sight.
- Complete sentence 22. We have more tonight from NBC's Robert Hager.

**Robert Hager:**

- Fragment (verb phrase) 23. Looks like everyday vacuuming, but this is not a cleaning service.
- Complete sentence 24. Instead, it's Peter Lukk, a Johns Hopkins University researcher searching for causes of allergies and asthma that affect 50 million Americans.
- Fragment (participial phr.) 25. Sucking up dust with microscopic organisms that can cause the problems, from under beds, on shelving, and beneath kitchen sinks.
- Fragment (noun phrase) 26. Part of a broad study to find ways to ease the symptoms of those who suffer, like 16-year-old Liz Moraz.
- Complete sentence 27. To help, Hopkins scientists have selected 240 homes of allergy sufferers, including the one where Liz and her mother, Susan, live.
- Complete sentence 28. The vacuum dust is collected, labeled according to the rooms it comes from, and taken to a lab.
- Complete sentence 29. And what does it reveal?
- Complete sentence 30. Just one pinch of dust can contain a thousand mites that cause a third of all allergies, or any one of several hundred varieties of molds that cause problems for half of allergy patients.
- Fragment (noun phrase) 31. The hope?



Fragment (noun clause)	32. That by learning the source of the problems, families can cut down on exposure.
Fragment (noun phrase)	33. In charge, Dr. Peyton Eggleston.
Complete sentence	34. The Morazes have already taken steps researchers say can help many.
Complete sentence	35. Leave floors bare where possible, because carpeting harbors mites.
Complete sentence	36. Keep windows curtain-free, for the same reason.
Complete sentence	37. Use allergen-proof liners around mattresses and pillows, and wash all bedding once a week.
Fragment (noun phrase)	38. All to reverse an alarming national trend.
Fragment (absolute)	39. One of every five in the U.S. now suffering from allergies.
Fragment (absolute)	40. Asthma doubling over the last decade.
Fragment (adverb clause)	41. As researchers armed with tiny vacuums work to learn more about an invisible enemy that causes so much misery.
Segue fragment	42. Robert Hager, NBC News, Washington.

Of the 42 numbered utterances from this part of the Wednesday *Nightly News*, I have identified 6 segue fragments and 17 other fragments, leaving 19 complete sentences. Among the other fragments, I have identified them by type – noun phrase, verb phrase, prepositional phrase, participial phrase, absolute phrase (called an absolute clause in Great Britain), noun clause, and adverb clause. There is room for disagreement, of course, in the making of distinctions between segue fragments and other fragments, and in making distinctions among the various kinds of other fragments. But regardless of such possible disagreements about particular labels, these transcripts provide a very interesting glimpse into the sentence structures that make up a large part of the evening news in America.

One thing to be noted is how regularly the sentences of these transcripts make use of some of the key features of what is often referred to as “headlines” (Halliday 1994). I have in mind particularly those features that call attention to the fast-breaking nature or immediacy of the news reports: present-tense verbs to report events from the near past, as well as lead statements expressed in short fragments that serve the function of providing a headline for a story. Another feature of these transcripts worth noting is the repeated and insistent reference to “today,” “tonight,” and



“this evening”—there were more than 100 such references in the 3 nights of this news show.

But what most caught my attention in these transcripts was the number of sentence fragments that are not segue fragments. I counted 502 total utterances in those three nights, with, by my count, 76 segue fragments total. Of the 426 remaining utterances, 111 were other kinds of fragments—that is, more than 1 out of 4 utterances were non-segue sentence fragments. My intuitive awareness that fragments were quite common in these broadcasts was fully confirmed by the analysis of these three transcripts.

However, the number of sentence fragments was not the only surprise, from my point of view.

**NBC Nightly News, November 29-December 1, 2000 - Summary**

**I. Spoken Units**

	<u>Nov. 29</u>	<u>Nov. 30</u>	<u>Dec. 1</u>	<u>Total</u>
A. Total units/complete utterances:	133	179	190	502
B. Total segue fragments:	20	28	28	76
C. Total other fragments:	34	36	41	111
D. All fragments (B+C):	54	64	69	187
E. All fragments/Total units:	40.6%	35.7%	36.3%	37.2%
F. Segue fragments/Total units:	15.0%	15.6%	14.7%	15.1%
G. Other fragments/Total units:	25.6%	20.1%	21.6%	22.1%
H. C/(A-B):	30.1%	23.8%	25.3%	26.1%

**II. Types of Fragments**

	<u>Nov. 29</u>	<u>Nov. 30</u>	<u>Dec. 1</u>	<u>Total</u>
A. Absolute Phrases:	12	15	19	46
B. Noun Phrases:	14	17	14	45
C. Verb Phrases:	1	2	0	3
D. Prepositional Phrases:	2	1	1	4
E. Subordinate Clauses:	2	1	1	4
F. Participial Phrase:	1	0	1	2
G. Adverb:	1	0	0	1



H. Elliptical Clauses:	1	0	5	6
Totals:	34	36	41	111
Abs. Phrases/Totals:	35.3%	41.7%	46.3%	41.4%

The summary shows, in section I, my analysis of all the utterances of those three news shows, and part II lists and enumerates the kinds of fragments and their frequency in each of the three transcripts I analyzed. For me, the most striking element of this second part of the analysis was the very high incidence of a grammatical structure that is for all practical purposes the absolute phrase.

### Absolute Phrases (Clauses), and How to Construct Them

#### 1. Non-“to be” versions:

The test had started. We took our seats.

The test having started. We took our seats.

**The test having started**, we took our seats.

#### 2. “To be” versions:

My parents recovered three of the chairs. One of them was nearly shattered.

My parents recovered three of the chairs. One of them being nearly shattered.

My parents recovered three of the chairs, **one of them nearly shattered**.

#### 3. The optional introductory “with”

Her head was held high. She walked across the lobby and out the door.

(With) her head being held high. She walked across the lobby and out the door.

**With her head held high**, she walked across the lobby and out the door.

Although the sentence fragment made up of a noun phrase was also very common (45% of all non-segue fragments), the absolute phrase is a construction that is thought to be quite uncommon, even when used properly within a complete sentence. To see it turn up in this analysis with such frequency (46% of all non-segue fragments) made me wonder about the peculiar attractiveness of this construction for these news broadcasters.

The noun phrase fragment seems to function here primarily as an appositive, one noun unit renaming a previous noun unit for effect. But the absolute phrase is marked by its inclusion of a verb form, even though it is not a verb form showing tense



and number. The absolute construction thus has the advantage of being a slightly reduced sentence, with the noun and the verb form following it providing something like subject and verb information. But it is not a complete sentence, and its fragment status may perhaps contribute to the tone of urgency and of breaking news that the headline style seems to offer.

Moreover, a few international scholars attending the conference were struck by how familiar these absolute phrases used as fragments seemed to them when they considered news broadcasts in their home countries. One Finnish colleague and several British colleagues were quite certain that my description of the use of this particular fragment offered a very good description of the practices of the news broadcasters they were most familiar with in their home countries. It may be the case that this use of the absolute phrase fragment is quite widespread, if not standard.

This small study is, however, partial and inconclusive. I have studied the transcripts of three nights of one television network's national news broadcast. We would have much more reliable information about the uses of fragments—and the frequency and nature of the absolute phrase as one of those fragments—if there were larger studies of the news broadcasts of NBC, CBS, ABC, Fox, CNN, and other networks, in the USA as well as in other countries. With the nightly news broadcast being a regular feature in the lives of many people, the deliberate fragment may have found a new home for itself.

## Literature

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*Fragmety zdań w „Wiadomościach wieczornych” NBC.  
Analiza gramatyczna*

Artykuł przedstawia analizę nagrania trzech programów „Wiadomości wieczornych” NBC, prowadzonych przez dziennikarza Toma Brokaw. W programach wykryto wiele fragmentów zdań pełniących różne m.in. delimitacyjne funkcje. W artykule wymieniono i opisano występujące w programach fragmenty, zwracając szczególną uwagę na frazy kompletne – typ o największej frekwencji w analizowanych tekstach. Autor proponuje podjąć dalsze badania w celu określenia na ile fragmenty zdań rozpowszechnione są w innych programach informacyjnych amerykańskich i zagranicznych.

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*The Millennium advertisement*

In December, 1998, British Government's New Millennium Experiences Company launched its advertisement aiming, according to the company's spokesperson, to 'get the people thinking about the millennium' (Gibson 1998). The ninety-long advertisement, with the voice-over of the British actor Jeremy Irons, presents the millennium as one day and in such a way evokes various achievements of the last 1000 years on a 24-hour time-line. The script for the full text of the advertisement, see the Appendix) is set against the background of the sun rising and falling over the Easter Island and its famous stone figures.

My aim in this paper is two-fold. Firstly, I shall argue that the advertisement constructs the millennium as a predominantly British affair and it is predominantly the British perspective that is used in representing its events referred to. Moreover, I shall also argue that the Britishness of the construction of the millennium is conveying the 'British way of life'. Thus, while not 'being the British thing' (Billig 1995) explicitly, the advertisement focuses on what it takes to be British in the everyday life.

Secondly, I shall also argue that there is a tension between the verbal and the visual modes of the text. While the verbal is geared towards inquiring a community (Anderson 1983; Billig 1995), the visual is ambivalent between being concerned on the one hand with humankind in general, and, on the other, anchoring the British perspective. This tension arises from what I would see as a reversal of anchorage relationship between verbal and the visual discourses. I shall propose that in con-