

Sentence Fragments in Major US Network News Broadcasts: The Nightly News on ABC, CBS, and NBC¹

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In 2001, I did an analysis of NBC's nightly news broadcast, noting the remarkable frequency of sentence fragments in those news broadcasts. Out of 502 utterances spoken as complete sentences in three evenings of NBC's news shows, there were 187 sentence fragments: 111 utterances that could be construed as ordinary sentence fragments, and 76 segue fragments—introductions, transitions, and sign-offs. Of the 111 ordinary fragments, 48 were noun phrases, but the next largest group (47 in all) had a grammatical structure that made them very similar to the structure of the absolute phrase, also known as the absolute clause, the absolute of attendant circumstance, or the nominative absolute. On the basis of this analysis, I speculated that the sentence fragment had become a new and strategic element in the grammar of spoken utterances in the broadcast of the nightly news in the United States. But I also noted the need for further analysis—of a larger body of broadcasts by NBC, but also of the other major broadcasting entities in the United States and in other countries. A larger body of transcripts analyzed for these features should tell us much more about the uses of fragments in these news broadcasts, and more about the prevalence of the absolute variety of sentence fragment as well (see Vanden Bosch 2002).

1 This paper was originally presented at the 40th Linguistics Colloquium, in Moscow, Russia, on August 27, 2005.

In this paper, I analyze two additional sets of broadcast news shows, from ABC and CBS, to accomplish two related tasks: (1) to determine the frequency of sentence fragments in these broadcasts (2) and to propose a more nuanced view of the uses of fragments in this segment of the North American mass media. My updated analysis should provide a more accurate description of what appears to be a trend in these broadcasts, namely, to depend on sentence fragments to carry information and to create a sense of the urgency or immediacy of breaking news stories.

For all three networks, I chose to analyze broadcast transcripts of the nightly news broadcasts that aired on the same three nights in the year 2000—November 29, November 30, and December 1. In the analysis that follows, I have employed the label “absolute phrase” to refer to a variety of constructions that are approximated in the news broadcasts that I have analyzed. It is important to note that I am using this label to describe kinds of sentence fragments in the broadcasts; I am not identifying the standard sort of absolute phrase as it comes to expression in complete grammatical utterances. (See Appendix A: The Nature and Varieties of the Absolute Phrase, below). Moreover, I have also done a good deal of basic research in order to determine how often absolute phrases occur in spoken and written English in the late 20th century. Although I was unable to do a large-scale analysis of North American uses of this construction, I was able to perform a substantial analysis of ICE-GB for this construction. See Appendix B:

Analysis of NBC, ABC, and CBS

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

Spoken Units (8289 words)

	<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:	18	27	28	73
C. Total other fragments:	36	37	41	114
D. All fragments (B+C):	54	64	69	187
E. All fragments/Total units:	40.6%	35.8%	36.3%	37.3%
F. Segue fragments/Total units:	13.5%	15.1%	14.7%	14.5%
G. Other fragments/Total units:	27.1%	20.7%	21.6%	22.7%
H. C/(A-B):	31.3%	24.3%	25.3%	26.6%

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Types of Fragments

	<u>Nov. 29</u>	<u>Nov. 30</u>	<u>Dec. 1</u>	<u>Total</u>
A. Absolute Phrases:	12	15	20	47
B. Noun Phrases:	16	17	15	48
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:	36	36	43	115
Abs. Phrases/Totals:	33.3%	41.7%	46.5%	40.9%

The two main features of this analysis of NBC materials are the large number of fragments used in the broadcasts and the large number of absolute phrases.

ABC News, November 29-December 1, 2000—Summary

Spoken Units (8377 words)

	<u>Nov. 29</u>	<u>Nov. 30</u>	<u>Dec. 1</u>	<u>Total</u>
A. Total units/complete utterances:	175	175	186	536
B. Total segue fragments:	13	16	22	51
C. Total other fragments:	28	15	26	69
D. All fragments (B+C):	41	31	48	120
E. All fragments/Total units:	23.4%	17.7%	25.8%	22.4%
F. Segue fragments/Total units:	7.4%	9.1%	11.8%	9.5%
G. Other fragments/Total units:	16.0%	8.6%	13.9%	12.9%
H. C/(A-B):	17.3%	9.4%	15.9%	14.2%

Types of Fragments

	<u>Nov. 29</u>	<u>Nov. 30</u>	<u>Dec. 1</u>	<u>Total</u>
A. Absolute Phrases:	0	0	8	8

	<u>Nov. 29</u>	<u>Nov. 30</u>	<u>Dec. 1</u>	<u>Total</u>
B. Noun Phrases:	20	10	9	39
C. Verb Phrases:	0	0	0	0
D. Prepositional Phrases:	2	2	0	4
E. Subordinate Clauses:	5	2	5	12
F. Participial Phrase:	0	1	0	1
G. Adverb:	0	0	0	0
H. Elliptical Clauses:	1	0	2	3
I. Gerund Phrases:	0	0	1	1
J. Adjectives:	0	0	1	1
Totals:	28	15	26	69
Abs. Phrases/Totals:	0%	0%	30.8%	11.6%

In this set of data, it is noteworthy that the incidence of fragments and of absolute phrase fragments is much smaller for ABC than for NBC in this time period.

CBS Evening News, November 29-December 1, 2000—Summary

Spoken Units (8286 words)

	<u>Nov. 29</u>	<u>Nov. 30</u>	<u>Dec. 1</u>	<u>Total</u>
A. Total units/complete utterances:	149	174	185	508
B. Total segue fragments:	16	15	21	52
C. Total other fragments:	10	12	15	37
D. All fragments (B+C):	26	27	36	89
E. All fragments/Total units:	17.4%	15.5%	19.5%	17.5%
F. Segue fragments/Total units:	10.7%	8.6%	11.4%	10.2%
G. Other fragments/Total units:	6.7%	6.9%	8.1%	7.3%
H. C/(A-B):	7.5%	7.5%	9.1%	8.1%

Types of Fragments

	<u>Nov. 29</u>	<u>Nov. 30</u>	<u>Dec. 1</u>	<u>Total</u>
A. Absolute Phrases:	1	2	3	6

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	<u>Nov. 29</u>	<u>Nov. 30</u>	<u>Dec. 1</u>	<u>Total</u>
B. Noun Phrases:	5	8	10	23
C. Verb Phrases:	0	0	0	0
D. Prepositional Phrases:	0	0	2	2
E. Subordinate Clauses:	1	0	0	1
F. Participial Phrase:	1	0	0	1
G. Adverbs:	0	0	0	0
H. Elliptical Clauses:	2	1	0	3
I. Gerund Phrases	0	1	0	1
Totals:	10	12	15	37
Abs. Phrases/Totals:	10.0%	16.7%	20.0%	16.2%

Here again the incidence of fragments and of absolute phrase fragments is considerably smaller than for the NBC broadcasts of the same time period.

Discussion: Although the transcripts analyzed for this study do not make up a large corpus of material, it seems clear that the heavy reliance on fragments, and on absolute phrase fragments in particular, is a feature of NBC to a much greater extent than it is of the major US network news stations in general. It appears to be the case that all three networks make some use of sentence fragments in their broadcasts, but NBC uses fragments much more frequently. Moreover, the use of the absolute phrase fragment almost constitutes a signature of the current NBC style. Clearly, more work needs to be done in this sort of analysis—all three broadcasts could be studied over a longer period of time in order to see more clearly the development of the uses of fragments in the news broadcasts. And it would be worth studying the broadcast practices of other networks as well, in the USA and elsewhere.

One further piece of information that I extracted from these transcripts has to do with one additional complexity—the use of fragments and absolute fragments by various newspeople. In the following charts, it becomes clearer that these features have become part of the house style of NBC, and that other newscasters use these features far less frequently than do the employees of NBC News.

Analysis by Speaker

NBC Nightly News, November 29-December 1, 2005

	Total Spoken Units	Total Fragments	Segue Fragments	Other Fragments	"Absolute" Fragments	Noun Phrase Fragments
Tom Brokaw	215	75	50	26	5	16
Robert Hager	36	15	2	13	3	5
Pete Williams	36	11	4	7	5	2
Jim Avila	34	15	2	13	6	7
Mike Jensen	34	17	2	15	5	8
David Bloom	22	7	3	4	3	0
Roger O'Neil	19	3	1	2	1	1
Dan Abrams	18	8	2	6	5	0
David Gregory	18	3	3	0	0	0
Andrea Mitchell	18	9	1	8	1	5
Claire Shipman	18	6	2	4	1	2
Kelly O'Donnell	17	10	1	9	9	0
Anne Thompson	17	8	1	7	3	2
Totals	502	187	73	114	47	48

ABC News, November 29-December 1, 2005

	Total Spoken Units	Total Fragments	Segue Fragments	Other Fragments	"Absolute" Fragments	Noun Phrase Fragments
Peter Jennings	185	55	21	34	0	26
Charles Gibson	89	30	18	12	5	5
Aaron Brown	33	4	2	2	1	1
Betsy Stark	31	3	1	2	0	1

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	Total Spoken Units	Total Fragments	Segue Fragments	Other Fragments	"Absolute" Fragments	Noun Phrase Fragments
Jackie Judd	23	4	1	3	2	0
Sani Donaldson	22	1	1	0	0	0
Erin Hayes	20	1	1	0	0	3
Bill Blakemore	19	7	1	6	0	5
John Martin	16	3	1	2	0	2
George Stephatnop.	14	3	0	3	0	0
Brian Rooney	13	1	1	0	0	0
Dean Reynolds	12	0	0	0	0	0
Lisa Stark	11	2	1	1	0	1
Mike von Fremd	11	1	1	0	0	0
Jeffrey Toobin	10	2	0	2	0	0
Steven Gey	9	1	0	1	0	0
Ted Koppel	8	2	1	1	0	0
Totals	536	120	51	69	8	41

CBS Evening News, November 29-December 1, 2005

	Total Spoken Units	Total Fragments	Segue Fragments	Other Fragments	"Absolute" Fragments	Noun Phrase Fragments
Dan Rather	220	49	31	18	2	11
Byron Pitts	42	9	4	5	3	1
Jim Axelrod	38	5	3	2	0	2
Anthony Mason	33	5	2	3	0	3
Bill Whitaker	27	5	3	2	1	1
John Roberts	24	3	3	0	0	0
Eric Engberg	22	3	0	0	0	3
Bob Schieffer	18	1	1	0	0	0

	Total Spoken Units	Total Fragments	Segue Fragments	Other Fragments	"Absolute" Fragments	Noun Phrase Fragments
Sandra Hughes	17	2	1	1	0	1
Richard Schlesinger	16	1	0	1	0	0
Jonathan Turley	14	2	1	1	0	0
Bob Orr	11	1	1	0	0	0
Jim Stewart	11	1	1	0	0	0
Elizabeth Kaledin	9	1	1	0	0	0
Harold Dow	3	0	0	0	0	0
Announcer	2	0	0	0	0	0
Steve Kroft	1	1	0	1	0	1
Totals	508	89	52	37	6	23

Work Cited: J.V. Bosch, , *Sentence Fragments in the <NBC Nightly News>: A Grammatical Analysis*, "Stylistyka"2002: 315-323.

Appendix A: The Nature and Varieties of the Absolute Phrase

Part of the difficulty of 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 phrase itself is considered to have no grammatical relationship to any one part of the clause it belongs to (thus the name "absolute"); or the phrase is considered to function as an adverbial modifying the entire clause it belongs to.

The structure of the absolute phrase is readily understood in its many varieties if it is seen as a reduced or compressed version of a full clause, a version in which the finite form of the verb has been changed to a non-finite form. The subject of the clause remains the same in the phrase, but it is (typically) followed by the non-finite form of the verb; however, if the verb or its auxiliary is a form of the verb "to be," that form itself is regularly omitted. In what follows, I indicate the dropped "to be" verb form with the null symbol (\bar{R}).

The absolute phrase, further, has the internal grammatical features of the basic sentence patterns of English. The absolute phrase regularly displays the structures

of the following sentence forms; note the corresponding absolute phrase versions following the sentence forms:

- A. Subject–Intransitive Verb:
 - a. His head was in the clouds.
 - b. His head being in the clouds, or
His head \emptyset in the clouds.
- B. Subject–Linking Verb–Subjective Complement (Noun):
 - a. Her face was a mask.
 - b. Her face being a mask, or
Her face \emptyset a mask.
- C. Subject–Linking Verb–Subjective Complement (Adjective):
 - a. His eyes were dull with sleep.
 - b. His eyes being dull with sleep, or His eyes \emptyset dull with sleep.
- D. Subject–Transitive Verb–Direct Object (with similar structures for the transitive patterns featuring indirect objects and objective complements):
 - a. The rock hit its target.
 - b. The rock hitting its target.
- E. Subject–Passive-Voice Verb:
 - a. The dog was tethered again.
 - b. The dog being tethered again, or The dog \emptyset tethered again.
- F. Expletive–Intrans. Verb–Subject
 - a. There were no students in the room.
 - b. There being 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 “to be” verb.)

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				Totals	Per million words
	Extr 1	Extr. 2 "with"	Extr. 3	Extr. 4 "with"		
ICE-GB Categories						
SPOKEN: 600,000 words, total						
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)	2	1	1	2	6	300
Legal presentations (20,000)	0	0	1	1	2	100
Broadcast news (40,000)	1	2	2	15	20	500
Broadcast talks (40,000)	0	0	2	3	5	125
Non-broadcast talks (20,000)	0	0	1	2	3	150
<i>Subtotals, by Extr. Formula</i>	6	15	28	37	86	
WRITTEN: 400,000 words, total						
Student essays (20,000)	0	0	4	3	7	350
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	2	2	2	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	2	200
Acad: Technology (20,000)	0	1	3	2	6	300

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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	30	5	40	1000
<i>Subtotals, by Extr. Formula</i>	<i>14</i>	<i>25</i>	<i>79</i>	<i>66</i>	<i>184</i>	
Totals, by Extr. Formula	20	40	107	103	270	

Sentence Fragments in Major US Network News Broadcasts: The Nightly News on ABC, CBS, and NBC

In this paper, I report on the follow-up to my earlier work on assessing the uses of sentence fragments in the nightly news programs of the major US television networks. In that earlier work ("Stylistika" XI [2002], pp. 315-323), I had called attention to the very high incidence of sentence fragments, and of a particular kind of fragment, in the NBC newscasts. That particular kind of fragment is very similar grammatically to the absolute phrase (AKA absolute clause), and such fragments made up nearly half of the fragments in the transcripts I studied.

In this follow-up report, I have studied the newscasts of the other two major news networks in the US -ABC and CBS-during the same time period, November 29-December 1, 2000. As I report here, it turns out that the preference for the absolute phrase fragment style of NBC almost certainly constitutes a house style; the transcripts of the ABC and CBS broadcasts are not nearly as rich in fragments as the NBC transcripts are. In this report I have also attempted to show the extent to which certain newsmen and women have used or not used such constructions in these broadcasts.