Grammar from *A Christmas Carol*

A clause must contain a subject and a verb (simple predicate): a phrase need not. **Note:** a phrase can be part of a clause but a clause cannot be part of a phrase.

**A prepositional phrase** is a phrase that begins with a preposition.

Both phrases and clauses can act as adverbs and adjectives. They also can act as nouns though this is less common. Prepositional phrases only rarely act as nouns.

The highlighted words in each of the following sentences are phrases:

- The idea **being an alarming one**, he scrambled **out of bed**, and groped his way **to the window**. He was obliged **to rub the frost off** (1) **with the sleeve** (2) **of his dressing-gown** (3) before he could see anything.

In the second sentence above, there are two **clauses**:

- He was obliged to rub the frost off with the sleeve of his dressing-gown
- before he could see anything.

These are clauses because they contain subjects (He/he) and verbs / simple predicates (obliged/could see).

**Clause:**

- His nephew left the room without an angry word

**Phrases:**

- of his nephew / leaving the room

By themselves these two phrases have no predicate: the adjective phrase "leaving the room" describes the nephew, but there is nothing here to show why the writer is mentioning the nephew in the first place.

**Clause:**

- The nephew left the room.

This is a complete clause because the writer is mentioning the nephew because he left the room.

- I saw a picture of his nephew leaving the room.
This is also a complete clause. The writer is mentioning the nephew leaving the room because he "saw a picture" of his nephew leaving the room.

Clause:

- Rise!

Yes, this single-word command (known as the imperative) is also a clause, even though its subject is understood to be whoever is being talked to. The clause clearly means, "[You] rise!" Direct commands are fairly common in speech.

~Prepositions

A **preposition** links nouns, pronouns and phrases to other words in a sentence. The word or phrase that the preposition introduces is called the **object** of the preposition.

A preposition usually indicates the relationship of its object in time or space logic to the rest of the sentence as in the following examples:

- Her copy of *A Christmas Carol* is **on** the table.
- Her copy of *A Christmas Carol* is **beneath** the table.
- Her copy of *A Christmas Carol* is leaning **against** the table.
- Her copy of *A Christmas Carol* is **beside** the table.
- She held her copy of *A Christmas Carol over** the table.
- She read her copy of *A Christmas Carol during** class.

In each of the preceding sentences, the preposition **of** links "copy" to "*A Christmas Carol*"; in each of the preceding sentences a preposition locates the noun "copy" in space or in time. Of is possibly the most common preposition; it often can be replaced by a possessive noun ("the children of their children" with "their children's children"; "from the window of a hut" with "from a hut's window") or by simply placing its object before the noun it modifies and using it as an adjective (Her *Christmas Carol* copy) - this latter technique is not recommended in for your papers.

A **prepositional phrase** is made up of the preposition, its **object** and any associated adjectives or adverbs. A prepositional phrase can function as a noun (rarely), an adjective, or an adverb.

The following are common prepositions relating to:

- **time**: after, at, before, during, past, since, till, to, until, upon
- **location**: about, above, across, after, against, along, among, around, at, behind, below, beneath, beside, between, beyond, by, down, from, in, inside, into, on, onto, out, outside, over, through, to, toward, under, underneath, up, upon.
- **possession**: by, of, to, with.
- **other**: despite, except, for, like, off, throughout.

**Note**: not all of these words are always prepositions; it is irritating, but many words in English can "be" more than one part of speech and retain their basic meaning. You will see that prepositions relating to time are also often adverbial conjunctions; some words that are usually prepositions become adverbs when they follow a verb and are not followed by an object: In "[It looked] with ghostly spectacles turned up upon its ghostly forehead" "up" acts as an adverb modifying the verb and "upon" is a preposition introducing a prepositional phrase (the phrase is also an adverb. Notice you could end the sentence with "up" and not be ending it with a preposition.)

Each of the **highlighted** words in the following sentences is a preposition and introduces a prepositional phrase:

- It was clothed **in** one simple green robe.

  In this sentence, the preposition "in" introduces the noun "robe." The prepositional phrase "**in one simple green robe**" functions as an adverb describing how it (the spirit) was clothed.

- Away they came, flocking **through** the streets.

  Here, the prepositional phrase acts as an adverb describing where they flocked.

- Mrs. Cratchit, looking slowly all **along** the carving-knife, prepared to plunge it **in** the breast.

  The prepositional phrase "along the carving knife" acts as an adverb, describing where Mrs. Cratchit was looking. The prepositional phrase **in the breast** acts as an adverb, describing where the knife was to be plunged.

- There he went, and took Scrooge **with** him, holding **to** his robe; and **on** the threshold **of** the door the Spirit smiled, and stopped to bless Bob Cratchit's dwelling **with** the sprinkling **of** his torch.

  Here the prepositional phrase **with him** acts as an adverb modifying the verb "took."
The prepositional phrase *to his robe* acts as an adverb modifying the **participle** "holding."
The prepositional phrase *of the door* acts as an adjective modifying the **noun** "threshold."
The prepositional phrase **with the sprinkling** acts as an adverb modifying the **infinitive** "to bless."
The prepositional phrase *of the door* acts as an adjective modifying the **noun** (gerund) "sprinkling."
At Bob Cratchit's elbow stood the family display of glass: two tumblers, and a custard-cup without a handle.

The prepositional phrase "At Bob Cratchit's elbow" acts as an adverb modifying the verb "stood."
The prepositional phrase "of glass" acts as an adjective modifying the noun "stood."
The prepositional phrase "without a handle" acts as an adjective modifying the noun "custard-cup."

~Verbals and Verbal Phrases

Infinitives and Infinitive Phrases

An infinitive is a verbal consisting of the word to plus a verb (in its "stem" form) and functioning as a noun, adjective, or adverb. The term verbal indicates that an infinitive, like the other two kinds of verbals (participles and gerunds), is based on a verb and therefore expresses action or a state of being. However, like all verbs, an infinitive is never "the verb" of a sentence. Instead, the infinitive may function as a subject, direct object, subject complement, adjective, or adverb in a sentence. Figuring out how it is functioning can be difficult.

- **To hear** Scrooge expending all the earnestness of his nature on such subjects, in a most extraordinary voice between laughing and crying; and **to see** his heightened and excited face; would have been a surprise to his business friends in the city, indeed. (subject)(subject)
- **I hope to live to be** another man from what I was (direct object)(adverb)
- **To edge** his way along the crowded paths of life, warning all human sympathy **to keep** its distance, was what the knowing ones call "nuts" to Scrooge. (subject)(adjectives)
- **To see** the dingy cloud come drooping down, obscuring everything, one might have thought that Nature lived hard by, and was brewing on a large scale. (adjective - modifying "one"; this is similar to an introductory participial phrase.)
- Scrooge was not a man to be frightened by echoes.
- **It seemed to scatter** gloom and mystery. (subject complement)
- Some people laughed **to see** the alteration in him. (adverb)

Be sure not to confuse an infinitive - to plus a verb - with a prepositional phrase beginning with to - to plus a noun or pronoun and any modifiers:

**Infinitives**: She clapped her hands and laughed, and tried **to touch** his head; but being too little, laughed again, and stood on tiptoe **to embrace** him. Then she began **to drag** him, in her childish eagerness, towards the door; and he, nothing loath **to go**, accompanied her.
Prepositions: To his great astonishment the heavy bell went on from six to seven, and from seven to eight, and regularly up to twelve; then stopped. Twelve! It was past two when he went to bed. The clock was wrong. An icicle must have got into the works.

Prepositions always are part of a phrase; infinitives often are. An infinitive phrase consists of an infinitive and words that either modify it or are its "object."

- to buy the beef ("beef" is the object of the infinitive.)
- to sit close to it ("close" is an adverb; "to it" a prepositional phrase modifying close)
- to attract his thoughts ("thoughts" is the object of the infinitive.)
- to shape some picture ("to shape" is the object of the infinitive.)

~Participles and Participial Phrases

A participle is a verbal that is formed by adding the suffix "ing" to the verb stem. Participles act as adjectives. They should not be mistaken for gerunds which are formed the same way but act as nouns. They should also not be confused with the use of the participial form in verbs. Participles often introduce adjective

- Down in the west the setting sun had left a streak of fiery red.

"Setting" is a participle modifying sun.

- Oh! But he was a tight-fisted hand at the grind-stone, Scrooge! a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous, old sinner!

"Squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching" are all participles. Like the adjectives covetous and old, they modify sinner.

- Awaking in the middle of a prodigiously tough snore, and sitting up in bed to get his thoughts together, Scrooge had no occasion to be told that the bell was again upon the stroke of One. (This is similar to an introductory infinitive phrase)
- Now, being prepared for almost anything, he was not by any means prepared for nothing.
- Basking in luxurious thoughts of sage-and-onion, these young Cratches danced about the table, and exalted Master Peter Cratchit to the skies.

In each of these sentences, the bolded words are participles that introduce participial phrases that modify the underlined nouns. Note that with being prepared both words are part of the participle.

The suffix "ed" added to the verb stem forms the past participle:
Then up rose Mrs. Cratchit, Cratchit's wife, dressed out but poorly in a twice-turned gown, but brave in ribbons, which are cheap and make a goodly show for sixpence.

"Dressed" is a past participle that introduces a participial phrase that modifies Mrs. Cratchit.

For the people who were shoveling away on the housetops were jovial and full of glee.

"Shoveling" is part of the verb "were shoveling" not a participle.

~Gerunds and Gerund phrases

Gerunds are formed from verbs and act as nouns. As noted above, gerunds, like participles, are formed by adding "ing" to a verb stem. Unlike participles, they cannot be formed by adding any other suffix to the verb stem. (Historically, participles were not formed with the "ing" suffix - they seem to have "borrowed" it from the gerunds many centuries ago) When they are not the objects of a preposition, they often can be seen as interchangeable with the infinitive of the same verb, although some verbs take infinitives as objects, and others gerunds.

He was taken with a violent fit of trembling.

"Trembling" is a gerund and the object of the preposition of.

Scrooge was not much in the habit of cracking jokes

In this sentence "cracking" is the object of a preposition and "jokes" (a noun) is the object of the gerund. This is a common construction for a gerund.

What's Christmas time to you but a time for paying bills without money; a time for finding yourself a year older, but not an hour richer; a time for balancing your books and having every item in 'em through a round dozen of months presented dead against you?

In the above sentence the gerunds are bolded and their objects are in italics. Note that the prepositional phrases "for paying", "for finding" and "for balancing" could be replaced with the infinitives "to pay", "to find" and "to balance."

Shaving was not an easy task, for his hand continued to shake very much; and shaving requires attention, even when you don't dance while you are at it.

Here the gerund "shaving" is the subject of both "was" and "required." It could be replaced by "To shave" in each case. It is interesting that using gerunds as subjects is relatively rare in Dickens.
• **Edging** his way along the crowded paths of life, *warning* all human sympathy to keep its distance, was what the knowing ones call "nuts" to Scrooge.

This sentence provides a good example of how narrow the difference between gerunds and participles can be. As written, "Edging" is the gerund subject of the sentence and "warning" is a participle modifying the gerund phrase. But look what happens if the gerund phrase is eliminated from the sentence:

• Warning all human sympathy to keep its distance was what the knowing ones call "nuts" to Scrooge.

"Warning" has been transformed into a gerund and the participial phrase is now a gerund phrase. Notice also that eliminating the word "ones" transforms knowing from a participle to a noun. Also notice that the past participle "crowded" cannot be transformed into a gerund. Again, all gerunds end in 'ing'.

(Note: Dickens' original sentence was: "To edge his way along the crowded paths of life, warning all human sympathy to keep its distance, was what the knowing ones call "nuts" to Scrooge." For purposes of illustration I changed the infinitive subject to a gerund.)

• Then the **shouting** and the **struggling**, and the onslaught that was made on the defenseless porter.
• The immense relief of **finding** this a false alarm.

In these two sentences, both of which are technically "fragments", gerunds seem to supply the actions.

~ **Other phrases**

**Appositive phrases**

Appositive phrases are phrases that usually follow a noun or proper noun and expand upon it. They are also the equivalent of the word they stand "in apposition to."

• "I know him; **Marley's Ghost!**"

Him = Marley’s ghost

• "In life I was your partner, **Jacob Marley.**"

Partner = Jacob Marley

• They went, **the Ghost and Scrooge**, across the hall, to a door at the back of the house.
Phrases of Comparison

A common form of comparison uses "as" and "so" to introduce phrases:

- Old Marley was as dead as a door-nail.
- The yard was so dark that even Scrooge, who knew its every stone, was fain to grope with his hands.

In both these sentences the phrases act as subject complements. Because they describe the subjects, they are adjectives. Like prepositional phrases, they can also act as adverbs. Note that some words on the comparative form (darker, softer) are turned into adverb phrases when used as adverbs (more darkly, more softly).

- It swung so softly in the outset that it scarcely made a sound.

Sometimes it can be difficult to determine whether a phrase modifies the subject of the verb. Do you think the following phrase modifies "flaring" or "candles?"

- Candles were flaring in the windows of the neighboring offices, like ruddy smears upon the palpable brown air.

Notice in the following sentence the comparative phrase acts as the subject:

- "There's more of gravy than of grave about you, whatever you are!"

Identifying Prepositional Phrases

Circle the prepositional phrases in the following paragraphs.
1. A light shone from the window of a hut, and swiftly they advanced towards it. Passing through the wall of mud and stone, they found a cheerful company assembled round a glowing fire. An old, old man and woman, with their children and their children's children, and another generation beyond that, all decked out gaily in their holiday attire. The old man, in a voice that seldom rose above the howling of the wind upon the barren waste, was singing them a Christmas song: it had been a very old song when he was a boy; and from time to time they all joined in the chorus. So surely as they raised their voices, the old man got quite blithe and loud; and so surely as they stopped, his vigor sank again.

Identifying Phrases and Clauses

Identify the underlined as either phrases or clauses:

1. Once upon a time -- of all the good days in the year, on Christmas Eve -- old Scrooge sat busy in his counting-house.

2. It was cold, bleak, biting weather: foggy withal; / and he could hear the people in the court outside, go wheezing up and down, beating their hands upon their breasts, and stamping their feet upon the pavement stones to warm them.

3. The city clocks had only just gone three, but it was quite dark already: it had not been light all day: and candles were flaring in the windows of the neighboring offices, like ruddy smears / upon the palpable brown air.

4. The fog came pouring in / at every chink and keyhole, and was so dense without, that although the court was of the narrowest, the houses opposite were mere phantoms.
Identifying Infinitives

Identify the "to's" as either part of an infinitive or part of a prepositional phrase.

1. "There are many things from which I might have derived good, by which I have not profited, I dare say," returned the nephew: "Christmas among the rest. But I am sure I have always thought of Christmas time, when it has come round -- apart from the veneration due to its sacred name and origin, if anything belonging to it can be apart from that -- as a good time: a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time: the only time I know of, in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely, and to think of people below them as if they really were fellow-passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys. And therefore, uncle, though it has never put a scrap of gold or silver in my pocket, I believe that it has done me good, and will do me good; and I say, God bless it!"

Identifying Participles and Gerunds

Identify the bolded words as participles, gerunds, or part of a verb.

1. Here, the flickering of the blaze showed preparations for a cozy dinner, with hot plates baking through and through before the fire, and deep red curtains, ready to be drawn to shut out cold and darkness.

2. Down in the west the setting sun had left a streak of fiery red, which glared upon the desolation for an instant, like a sullen eye, and frowning lower, lower, lower yet, was lost in the thick gloom of darkest night.

3. Passing through the wall of mud and stone, they found a cheerful company assembled round a glowing fire.
4. This idea *taking* full possession of his mind, he got up softly and shuffled in his slippers to the door.