

Good Writing Practice

Circumlocution: Absolute phrase

Introduction

The absolute phrase contains a noun headword and a present participle. The noun is the reason that the phrase is termed the absolute (actually nominative absolute). Its absoluteness is the result of the phrase being relatively independent of the main clause – an independence often necessitating its initiation by a *with*. Another feature of the absolute phrase is over-emphasis resulting from its usual sentence-end position.

An absolute phrase expresses a smooth literary but wordy narrative style, which seems unconventional compared to the formal descriptive style of research writing. Contributing most to the narrative (action-focused) style is the present participle (e.g., *being*), which conveys an ongoing action, similar to that of the progressive tense. This presentness can often result in a tense mismatch between the absolute and the conceptual component being conveyed.

Experimental sections

Results section: inter-data comparison

Example: wordy absolute phrase

The amount of root blunting was increased for both age groups, with both groups responding similarly.

Revision

*The amount of root blunting was **similarly** increased for both age groups.*

Notes

Although the absolute emphasises the concept of *similarly*, the revision does so succinctly without being narrative and repeating *both age groups*. The adverbial function of the absolute phrase is justified by its equivalence to the adverb *similarly*.

Contextual sections

Part 1 – Introduction section: research problem pertinent background

Example: unconventional absolute phrase

The ingestion of fluoride affects more than one

aspect of this system, with the principal effect being porous enamel.

Revision

*The ingestion of fluoride affects more than one aspect of this system, **but the principal effect is enamel porosity**.*

Notes

The relation (an equivalence) between information in the main clause and that of the absolute is clearer when the absolute is coordinated as an independent clause in a compound sentence. Thus, revision of the circumlocution expressed by absolute phrase is not only syntactic reduction but also replacement by an equally long but conventional structure (e.g., an independent clause of a compound sentence).

Part 2 – Introduction section: research objective

Example: wordy absolute phrase

The objective of this study was to further investigate the responsiveness of these genes with the ultimate project goal being the elucidation of the molecular mechanism associated with the BMP-2 signalling pathway for osteoblast differentiation.

Revision

*The objective of this study was (1) to further investigate and confirm responsiveness of these genes and (2) **to elucidate the molecular mechanism** associated with the BMP-2 signalling pathway for osteoblast differentiation.*

Notes

The narrative absolute phrase can be transformed into an infinitive phrase that can be coordinated with the first infinitive phrase *to further investigate the responsiveness of these genes*. The transformation is reductive from 21 words to 14. However, because of the length of each infinitive phrase, phrase enumeration is used for clarity.

In the example, another distraction is that the present participle *being* is inconsistent with the pastness of the objective.

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Part 3 – Discussion section: hypothesis + post-results support

Example: wordy absolute phrase

A statistically significant improvement was observed for tibial length, growth plate (length, width), and body weight, with the magnitude of the improvement appearing to be dose dependent.

Revision

*A statistically significant **dose-dependent** improvement was observed for tibial length, growth plate (length, width), and body weight.*

Notes

The reduced size and the pinpoint placement of *dose-dependent* contiguous to *improvement* clarifies meaning. The compounded noun-adjective *dose-dependent* is equivalent to the entire absolute phrase. Thus, the absolute is functioning adjectivally.

In the example, the present tense of the participle (i.e., *appearing*) is inconsistent with the pastness (i.e., *past support for hypothesis*).

Part 4 – Discussion section: limitation

Example: wordy absolute phrase

The results must be considered preliminary, with only one animal being examined.

Revision

*The results **limited to only one animal** must be considered preliminary.*

Notes

The revision conveys with greater clarity the reason for the preliminary nature of the results and involves replacement of the absolute phrase

by an adjectival past participle phrase (participle + prepositional phrase).

Summary

It is not unexpected that the absolute phrase is more frequent in the contextual sections (four out of five of the examples) than in the experimental sections of the journal article, because of the increased need for qualification in argument

development. Four of the revisions for circumlocution involve syntactic reduction and one, replacement by an equally long but conventional structure.

The circumlocution and end position–caused over-emphasis of an absolute phrase is further distracting by a narrative present tense structure disagreement in tense with the conceptual component. Such a distraction can range from

dissonance to nonprofessional tone. The non-professional tone also results from the usual informality of the absolute.

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Schematised distractions and revisions

Syntactic Reduction

Adverb

The amount of root blunting was increased for both age groups, with both groups responding similarly.

→ *The amount of root blunting was **similarly** increased for both age groups.*

Compound word

A statistically significant improvement was observed for tibial length, growth plate (length and width), and body weight, with the magnitude of the improvement appearing to be dose dependent.

→ *A statistically significant **dose-dependent** improvement was observed for tibial length, growth plate (length and width), and body weight.*

Participial phrase

The results must be considered preliminary, with only one animal being examined.

→ *The results **limited to only one animal** must be considered preliminary.*

Infinitive phrase

The objective of this study was to further investigate the responsiveness of these genes with the ultimate project goal being the elucidation of the molecular mechanism associated with the BMP-2 signalling pathway for osteoblast differentiation.

→ *The objective of this study was (1) to further investigate and confirm responsiveness of these genes and (2) **to elucidate the molecular mechanism***

associated with the BMP-2 signalling pathway for osteoblast differentiation.

Syntactic Transformation

Independent clause of a compound sentence

The ingestion of fluoride affects more than one aspect of this system, with the principal effect being porous enamel.

→ *The ingestion of fluoride affects more than one aspect of this system, **but the principal effect is enamel porosity**.*



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