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Prepositional Phrases

Prepositions show position, direction and relative time. A prepositional phrase is a group of words that includes a preposition and its direct object. There are 52 prepositions, and the good news is that only an unbalanced person with a real hatred of humanity would give a test question like this: “Name the 52 prepositions.” My answer would be: “Shoot me.” You don’t need to memorize them; they are readily recognized and easily crafted when the need calls. What you do need to know is this: With one exception, a prepositional phrase cannot be the subject of a sentence. More on that later.

Prepositions include such words as before, after, under, over, beneath, around, between, to, from, behind and about 44 delightful others. They usually appear in phrases. Remember that a phrase is a group of words that do not form a clause. A clause, whether dependent or independent, contains both a subject and verb. A phrase does not include a subject and verb. In these illustrations, subjects are in boldface. Verbs are in italics.

Dependent clause: Although **we** thoroughly *cleaned* the apartment.

Independent clause: The **landlord** *did* not *return* our deposit.

Subordinating dependent clause connected to an independent clause to form a complete sentence: Although **we** thoroughly *cleaned* the apartment, the **landlord** *did* not *return* our deposit.¹

Prepositional phrase: over the rainbow. Preposition: over. Object of the preposition: rainbow. (Over what? Over the rainbow.)

Used sparingly, prepositional phrases can spice up sentences. The kings of prepositional phrases must be songwriters Arthur Resnick and Kenny Young, who loved this device so much they built a song around it:

Oh the sun beats down² and melts the tar *upon the roof*
 And your shoes get so hot you wish your tired feet were fire-proof
Under the boardwalk, down by the sea
 On a *blanket with my baby* is where I'll be
From a park nearby happy sounds *from a carousel*
 You can almost taste the hotdogs and French fries they sell
Under the boardwalk, down by the sea
 On a *blanket with my baby* is where I'll be

Under the boardwalk, out of the sun
Under the boardwalk, we'll be having some fun
Under the boardwalk, people walking above²
Under the boardwalk, we'll be falling *in love*
Under the board-walk, board-walk

Earlier we said a preposition phrase cannot function as the subject of a sentence. Actually, it can, as in this example: “Under the boardwalk is where I would like to be.” (The verb, *is*, is driven by the subject, “under the boardwalk.” This is something of an oddity, an anomaly. Usually, a prepositional phrase acts as some other part of speech, like an adverb or adverbial phrase.

Confusion here is perfectly normal. Do not contemplate *hara kari*, though you must be asking yourself, did they really talk about this in seventh grade?

Gladys sells hotdogs under the boardwalk.

Gladys – subject

sells – verb

hotdogs – direct object of the verb.

under the boardwalk – prepositional phrase that functions as an adverb by telling us where Gladys sells the hotdogs, an adverbial phrase that modifies the verb.

Here is where student writers (and others who should know better) get into trouble: when they confuse the noun subject of a sentence with its prepositional phrase. Thus,

The team of dogs were pulling the sled.

We can argue about whether the subject of this sentence is “team” or “team of dogs,” but there is no argument that “dogs” is *not* the subject, because the team is pulling the sled. In any case, the subject is singular, because “team” is singular. Correctly stated, the sentence reads,

The team of dogs was pulling the sled.

The verb of a sentence and its subject must *agree*. Dogs pull, but a team pulls.

The concept is not difficult. Which of the following is correct?

“Help! A herd of elephants are trampling my petunias!”

“Help! A herd of elephants is trampling my petunias!”

The second one is correct. One herd is trampling my petunias, even if the herd has 100 screaming elephants. Here are some more examples of correct subject-verb agreement where a prepositional phrase intervenes:

The committee of four senators wants to review the proposal.

The board of directors plans to hire a new CEO.

“Establishment of principles” is our newest treatise.

Pay attention to correct subject-verb agreement even in sentences without prepositional phrases in the subject:

The team played its last game on Sunday.

This company always treats its employees with respect.

WJR in Detroit was one of the first radio stations to get its broadcast license.

NOTES

1. *Not* is an adverb that modifies the verb *did clean*. How did the landlord return our deposit? He *did not* return it.
2. Here, *down* and *above* function as adverbs, not as prepositions. Both of them modify a verb: beats *down*, walking *above*.
3. Resnick, Arthur, and Kenny Young. “Under the Boardwalk” (song). *Copyright info goes here*.