

THE IDENTIFIER

Good writers give readers information needed to understand their writing. Sometimes writers include in their sentences names of persons, places, objects, and other kinds of names that readers might not understand unless the writer identifies them. That's when an *appositive*, the identifying tool, comes in handy.

Look at these sentences to see how appositives improve sentences.

WITHOUT IDENTIFIERS

I came to philosophy as a last resort.

Ned came in and let the boarders out.

The dictionary had a picture of an aardvark.

WITH IDENTIFIERS

A professional football player, print and television journalist, academic English teacher and world-traveler, I came to philosophy as a last resort.

John McMurtry, "Kill 'Em! Crush 'Em! Eat 'Em Raw!"

Ned, the lanky high-school student who cleaned the cages and fed the animals morning and evening, came in and let the boarders out.

Sue Miller, *While I Was Gone*

The dictionary had a picture of an aardvark, a long-tailed, long-eared, burrowing African mammal living off termites caught by sticking out its tongue as an anteater does for ants.

Malcolm X and Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*

Remember this: Appositives are sentence parts that identify people, places, or things. Many appositives begin with one of these words: *a, an, the*.

ACTIVITY 1

Match the appositive with the sentence. Write out each sentence, underlining the appositive. Notice the three places appositives occur in a sentence: *opener, S-V split, closer*.

Sentences	Appositives
1. ^ , he reminded me of a baby bird. Tracy Chevalier, <i>The Girl with a Pearl Earring</i>	a. the year that showed us we could make our own destinies
2. The paper had a black spot on it, ^ . Shirley Jackson, "The Lottery"	b. a former college football player, six foot two and a swollen 245 pounds, with thick, meaty hands, every finger broken and bent
3. This was 1979, ^ . Roya Hakakian, <i>Journey from the Land of No</i>	c. a tan cow named Blind Tillie
4. One of them, ^ , was Cold Sassy's champion milk producer. Olive Ann Burns, <i>Cold Sassy Tree</i>	d. the black spot Mr. Summers had made the night before with the heavy pencil in the coal-company office
5. My father was an intimidating giant of a man, ^ . Perri Knize, <i>A Piano Odyssey</i>	e. a bald slight man

THE ELABORATOR

For good writing, more is usually better. Elaborating is a way of telling your readers more information and details so they understand clearly and completely what you're writing about. An *absolute*, the elaborating tool, gives readers more.

Look at these sentences to see how absolutes improve sentences.

WITHOUT ELABORATORS

He lifted the truck in one fluid, powerful motion.

A teenager in a black tank top hoisted a toddler onto her shoulder.

Mattie drank most of what was left.

WITH ELABORATORS

The sweat popping off his skin like oil on water, he lifted the truck in one fluid, powerful motion.

Mildred D. Taylor, *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*

A teenager in a black tank top, a greenish tattoo flowing across her broad back, hoisted a toddler onto her shoulder.

Barbara Kingsolver, *Animal Dreams*

Mattie drank most of what was left, the ice cubes sliding against her teeth with a click and a rattle.

Stephen King, *Bag of Bones*

Remember this: Absolutes are sentence parts that elaborate information. Every absolute could be a complete sentence if you added *was* or *were*. Here are the absolutes from above changed to sentences by adding *was* or *were*.

1. The sweat **was** popping off his skin like oil on water.
2. A greenish tattoo **was** flowing across her broad back.
3. The ice cubes **were** sliding against her teeth with a click and a rattle.

ACTIVITY 1

Match the absolute with the sentence. Write out each sentence, underlining the absolute. Notice the three places absolutes occur in a sentence: *opener*, *S-V split*, *closer*.

Sentences	Absolutes
<p>1. He began scrambling up the wooden pegs nailed to the side of the tree, ^ . John Knowles, <i>A Separate Peace</i></p>	a. hands and limbs swollen with venom
<p>2. ^ , my face and bare skin welted red. Keith Donohue, <i>The Stolen Child</i></p>	b. his heavy shoes making the snow crackle
<p>3. A seared man, ^ , rose from the curb. Fritz Leiber, "A Bad Day for Sales"</p>	c. his charred clothes fuming where the blast had blown out the fire
<p>4. He paused at the intersection, ^ . Anne Tyler, <i>Saint Maybe</i></p>	d. his back muscles working like a panther's
<p>5. The young man walked down the frozen land, ^ . James Michener, <i>Centennial</i></p>	e. the arches of his sneakers teetering on the curb

THE DESCRIBER

You've learned how to improve your writing by identification (*the appositive tool*) and elaboration (*the absolute tool*). Another way is to provide lots of description to help your readers clearly picture what you are writing about. A sentence-composing tool that provides descriptive details is a *participle*, the describing tool.

There are two kinds of participles: one—a *present participle*—ends in *-ing*, and the other—a *past participle*—usually ends in *-ed*.

Look at these sentences to see how participles improve sentences by adding more descriptive details.

WITHOUT DESCRIBERS

He continued to concentrate on the dusty road.

Jody's father was a little bothered by it.

Smaug the Dragon lay, with wings folded like an immeasurable bat.

Harry blinked and looked down at the floor.

WITH DESCRIBERS (-ing)

Grasping more firmly his newspaper-wrapped notebook and his tin-can lunch of cornbread and oil sausages, he continued to concentrate on the dusty road.

Mildred D. Taylor, *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*

Jody's father, watching the pony stop and start and trot and gallop, was a little bothered by it.

John Steinbeck, *The Red Pony*

WITH DESCRIBERS (-ed)

Smaug the Dragon lay with wings folded like an immeasurable bat, turned partly to one side so that the hobbit could see his underparts.

J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit*

Blinded by the blaze of the spells that had blasted from every direction, Harry blinked and looked down at the floor.

J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*

Remember this: Participles are sentence parts that describe. Some of them, called *present participles*, end in *-ing*. Others, called *past participles*, usually end in *-ed*.

Every participle is removable. If an *-ing* or *-ed* phrase is **not** removable, it's not a participle. Which two sentences below contain participles because the underlined part can be removed without destroying the rest of the sentence?

1. The runner, nearing the finish line, stumbled.
2. The runner was nearing the finish line.
3. The dog, covered with mud, jumped on the sofa.
4. The dog was covered with mud.

ACTIVITY 1

Match the participle with the sentence. Write out each sentence, underlining the participle. Notice the three places participles occur in a sentence: *opener, S-V split, closer*.

Sentences	Participles
<p>1. In the other narrow bed, his brother went on sleeping, ^ . Gina Berriault, "The Stone Boy"</p>	<p>a. pinned for a moment to the sky with his father's bullet</p>
<p>2. I took a turn at the oyster table, ^ . Pat Conroy, <i>South of Broad</i></p>	<p>b. holding a hand before her eyes so that other patients and visitors should not see</p>
<p>3. ^ , he soon had a roaring fire over which he thawed the ice from his face. Jack London, "To Build a Fire"</p>	<p>c. undisturbed by the alarm clock's rusty ring</p>
<p>4. The bird, ^ , was suspended in midair, and then it fell. Kate DiCamillo, <i>The Tiger Rising</i></p>	<p>d. working carefully from a small beginning</p>
<p>5. ^ , she began to weep. J. M. Coetzee, <i>Life and Times of Michael K</i></p>	<p>e. prying the oyster loose from its shells with the blunt-nosed knife</p>

THE COMBO

Sometimes things go better together. Fast food restaurants feature discounts for combos of sandwich, fries, and drink. Online stores advertise “better together” combo bargains for related items—books, clothes, shoes, and more. In composing sentences, a combo is using the identifier (*appositive*), the elaborator (*absolute*), or the describer (*participle*) within the same sentence, usually a mix of two, but sometimes all three.

Look at these sentences to see how combos improve sentences.

WITHOUT COMBOS

There were two people.

It was good to sit there in Charley’s kitchen.

Several of them remember hiking with George.

He spent three days propped up in bed.

WITH COMBOS (*underlined*)

There were two people there, a man and a woman, eating sandwiches while they stood up. *Combo: one identifier (appositive), one describer (participle)*

Michael Crichton, *Prey*

It was good to sit there in Charley’s kitchen, my coat and tie flung over a chair, surrounded by soul food and love. *Combo: one elaborator (absolute), one describer (participle)*

Eugenia Collier, “Sweet Potato Pie”

Several of them remember hiking with George, his long hair braided, carrying an ice ax, wearing nothing but net long johns. *Combo: one elaborator (absolute), two describers (participles)*

Kenneth Brower, *The Starship and the Canoe*

He spent three days propped up in bed, listening to the radio, reading comic books, and barking orders for Cokes, root beers, ginger ale, ice cream, and anything else he could think of, while poor Mary Margaret, a worrier from birth, wandered from room to room. *Combo: three describers (participles), one identifier (appositive)*

Fannie Flagg, *Standing in the Rainbow*

Remember this: Combos are two or more *different* tools within the same sentence: the identifier (*appositive*), the elaborator (*absolute*), the describer (*participle*). Used occasionally within sentences, combos add variety, content, style, texture.

ACTIVITY 1

Match the combo with the sentence. Write out each sentence, underlining the combo. Notice all the places combos occur in a sentence. Combos with a slash mark (/) indicate different places in the sentence for the combo's tools.

Sentences	Combos
1. Ratz, ^, filled a tray of glasses with draft Kirin beer. William Gibson, <i>Neuromancer</i>	a. his trousers rolled up, measuring the skeleton with a length of line

2. Many fishermen were around the skiff looking at what was lashed beside it, and one was in the water, ^ .

Ernest Hemingway,
The Old Man and the Sea

3. ^ , he looked like something an archeologist might find in the burial room of a pyramid, ^ .

Stephen King, *Bag of Bones*

4. ^ , Phyllis was with her father when her mother called her to come and see Neil Armstrong, ^ , set foot on the moon.

Frank McCourt, *Teacher Man*

5. All the time he was reading the paper, his wife, ^ , leaned out of the window, ^ .

Bernard Malamud,
"A Summer's Reading"

b. a fat woman with a white face / gazing into the street, her thick white arms folded under her loose breast

c. tending bar, his prosthetic arm jerking monotonously

d. blue-lipped, the skin around his eyes and the corners of his mouth a dark exploded purple / surrounded by his stuffed wives and pets, bedizened with his favorite jewels

e. concerned with her father who lay dying in the bedroom, but not wanting to miss the moon landing / the famous astronaut

ACTIVITY 2

Each author's sentence contains a combo. Identify the underlined tools. If you need to review the tool, study the pages below.

TOOLS

The Identifier (*appositive*)

The Elaborator (*absolute*)

The Describer (*participle*)

REVIEW THESE PAGES

pages 35–49

pages 50–66

pages 67–84