

# PHRASES – WHAT ARE THEY?

*What is a “phrase” in grammatical terms and why is it important?*

---

## CONTENTS

[The Phrase](#)

[Tests](#)

## THE PHRASE

Divide the following sentence into three parts:

The man was using an electric drill

Now divide the following into three parts:

The man who lives down the road might have been using a loud electric drill that he bought from Homebase

We can intuitively divide sentences up into phrases:

[The man] [was using] [an electric drill]

[The man who lives down the road] [might have been using] [a loud electric drill that he bought from Homebase]

A phrase is a collection of words in a sentence that intuitively make up a unit.

### Importance

We have seen that we can intuitively divide up the following sentence into 3 phrases. We can also divide it into 1 clause. We could also divide up the sentence in 7 words. However it is difficult to divide up the sentence into 4 parts, or 5 or 6.

The man was using an electric drill

The phrase then is a unit that is below the clause and above the word. A phrase is an important part of grammar and it is important that teachers are able to identify phrases in a sentence.

morpheme >> word >> phrase >> clause >> sentence

Phrases can be classified into categories such as noun phrase (NP), verb phrase (VP), etc.

## Embedding

One phrase can also be embedded in another phrase. For example in the following noun phrase (NP) we can see that another NP (the road) is embedded within it.

The man who lives down the road

## TESTS

Below the clause we have the phrase. A phrase is a collection of words that are closely bound to each other. There are three tests to see whether a group of words forms a phrase:

1. Movement
2. Meaning
3. Substitution

### Movement

In order for a group of words to be considered a phrase, they must pass the first test of movement. Consider the following:

1. The old man ate the chocolate cake
2. What the old man ate was the chocolate cake
3. It was the chocolate cake that the old man ate (Kuiper et al)

The group of words can be moved and we retain the grammar and sense of the sentence. Therefore we consider that the group of words are phrases.

### Meaning

The phrases *the old man* and *the chocolate cake* all have meaning, which is the second test for a phrase. We wouldn't say however that *the chocolate* by itself had meaning.

### Substitution

In the following we can substitute a pronoun for the phrases underlined.

Davina sold chocolates yesterday at the corner store  
She sold those yesterday there.

This ability to substitute indicates that *Davina*, *chocolates* and *at the corner store* are all phrases.

## SOURCES

Kuiper, K. & Allan, W.S. (2016) An Introduction to English Language. Palgrave.