A Writer’s Five Basic Grammar Brush Strokes for Vivid Sentences

I. Participles/Participial Phrases: an –ing form of a verb, acting like an adjective, tagged on to the beginning or end of a sentence or interrupting the main subject and verb.

Original Sentence

The diamond-scaled snakes attacked their prey.

Revised Sentences

Hissing, slithering, and coiling, the diamond-scaled snakes attacked their prey.

- a series of single participles adds more detail and suggests rapid movement

Flicking their forked red tongues and coiling their cold bodies, the diamond-scaled snakes attacked their prey.

- participial phrases add more detail at a slower but intense pace

II. Absolutes/Absolute Phrases: a one-two combo: a noun followed by an –ing verb or –ed verb: an absolute names and then describes a part of the thing named just in front of it.

Original Sentence

The cat climbed the tree.

Revised Sentences

The cat, claws digging, feet kicking, climbed the tree.

The cat climbed the tree, claws digging, feet kicking.

Other Examples

The cat climbed the tree, its silver claws digging, its tiny feet kicking.

The mountain climber edged along the cliff, hands shaking, feet trembling.

Feet trembling on the snow-covered tracks, the mountain climber edged along the cliff.

Hands frozen, heart heavy, the old man pulled the one advertisement from his lonely mailbox and walked home. (Note the –en verb form and the adjective following the noun.)

**Two Important Notes about participles and absolutes:

- Try using participles/participial phrases or absolute/absolute phrases both at the beginning and later in your sentences.
• Note that with absolutes and absolute phrases, it is better to add one or two rather than a series (that works for participles) so that the sentence isn’t overly weighted down with ideas.

Participles/Participial Phrases and Absolute/Absolute Phrases Exercise: Take the following stems and create some participles/participial phrases or absolutes/absolute phrases.

1. Melody froze
2. The Olympic long jumper thrust the weight of his whole body forward
3. The clown smiled
4. The rhino looked for freedom.
5. I glanced at my clock.
6. The kitten yawned
7. The driver peered once more at the specimen.
8. Now go back to any three sentences and try mixing participles and absolutes together.

III. Appositive: a noun or noun phrase that adds a second image to a noun named just in front of it.

Original Sentence

The raccoon enjoys eating turtle eggs.

Revised Sentence

The raccoon, a scavenger, enjoys eating turtle eggs.

Appositive Exercise: Rewrite each of the following sentences by adding an appositive after the noun/subject:

1. The volcano spewed forth lava and ash across the mountain.
2. The old Navajo woman stared blankly.
3. The waterfall poured the fresh, pure spray into the creek.
4. The fish felt he alligator’s giant teeth sink into his scales as he struggled to get away.

IV. Adjectives Shifted Out of Order: Many immature writers overload their descriptions with too many adjectives in sentences like “The large, red-eyed, angry bull moose charged the intruder.” A more mature writer, when she or he wishes to stack adjectives, avoids a three-in-a-row string by using a technique called shifting adjectives out of order.

Leaving one adjective in its original place, a mature writer might create this sentence: The large bull moose, red-eyed and angry, charged he intruder.

From Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s The Hound of the Baskervilles: “And then suddenly, in the very dead of night, there came a sound to my ears, clear, resonant, and unmistakable.” – Placed in their ordinary position, these three adjectives would have made the sentence sound childish.
Adjectives Out of Order Exercise: Rewrite the following sentences by using adjectives out of order:

1. The old, wrinkled woman smiled upon her newborn great-grandchild with pride.
2. The twisted, tormented boxer felt no compassion for his contender.
3. The tired, hungry cheetah stared at the gazelle, which would soon become her dinner.
4. The Pavilion was a simple, long, and rectangular city.
5. I could smell my crisp and starched mama plumping my pillow.

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V. Action Verbs/Active Voice: Use of active voice (rather than passive voice) and action verbs instead of the use of being verbs strengthens writing.

The runaway horse was ridden into town by an old, white-whiskered rancher. – passive voice

Passive voice uses the verb is or was along with or in the place of an action verb.

An old, white-whiskered rancher rode the runaway horse into town. – active voice

The grocery store was robbed by two armed men. – passive voice

Two armed men robbed the grocery store. – active voice

The gravel road was on the left side of the barn. – being verb

The gravel road curled around the left side of the barn. – action verb

There was a rat under my bed. – being verb with there

A rat hid under my bed. – action verb

Action Verb/Active Voice Exercise: Rewrite the sentences so that passive voice is transformed into active voice or being verbs are replaced with action verbs.

1. There was a hat on his head.
2. The dog was hit in the head by the ball.
3. The house was on fire.
4. Tanya was tired from the journey.
5. The girl is frozen by fear.
6. Now go back to any three active voice sentences you have created and try adding a participle, absolute, appositive, or adjectives out of order to each one.