

8

Absolute Constructions

TYPES OF ABSOLUTE CONSTRUCTIONS

1. *With verb (participle)*

a. general form

- (1) active
- (2) passive

The train being late, we missed our plane.

Their home ruined by the fire, they had to ask their neighbors for shelter.

b. perfect form

- (1) active
- (2) passive

The play having ended, we went backstage to congratulate the actors.

Their crops having been destroyed by the floods, the farmers appealed to the government for help.

2. *Without verb (form of **be** omitted)*

Predicate of absolute is:

- a. a noun
- b. an adjective
- c. a prepositional phrase
- d. an adverb

His former palatial home now a summer resort, he reflected on the sad turn of events which had brought this about.

The old mining town was utterly deserted, its streets gray and dead,

She looked at the man curiously, her head slightly to one side,

His terrible ordeal over, he did nothing but sleep for several days.

3. *Preceded by with*

a. with verb

She stood before him hopefully, with the letter of recommendation held tightly in her hand.

b. without verb

She stood before him hopefully, with the letter of recommendation in her hand.

8-1

ABSOLUTE CONSTRUCTIONS WITH PARTICIPLES

An absolute¹ construction contains a "subject" that is unchanged from the form it has in a full sentence. In the predicate, the finite verb is changed to a participle, or, if the verb is **be**, it may be omitted entirely.

¹The term *absolute* refers to a free grammatical element within a sentence.

This construction usually appears at the beginning or end of a sentence and is set off from the rest of the sentence with a comma.

Combine each set of sentences by changing the italicized sentence to an absolute construction. Keep the absolute construction in the same position as the sentence from which it has been made.

General Forms

OFFERING, OFFERED, BEING OFFERED

The general forms express the same time as that of the main verb.

EXAMPLE: a. *Tears were streaming down her face.*

The child ran home to be comforted by her mother.

Tears streaming down her face, the child ran home to be comforted by her mother.

b. *Their plot was discovered.*

The conspirators had to flee for their lives.

Their plot (being) discovered, the conspirators had to flee for their lives.

c. *The girl walked along gracefully.*

The huge basket on her head did not seem to be a heavy burden at all.

The girl walked along gracefully, the huge basket on her head not seeming to be a heavy burden at all.

1. *The men began to pour out from the factory.*

She watched to see which one was her husband.

2. *His health was regained.*

He was happy to return to work.

3. *Their air-conditioner was not working properly again.*

They decided to buy a new one.

4. *His eyes were finally opened to her hypocrisy.*

He wondered how he could ever have been deceived by her wiles.

5. *The rain began to make everyone uncomfortable.*

They decided to continue their dinner indoors.

6. The judge dismissed the charge against the man.
There was no conclusive evidence that he had committed the felony.
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7. *The labor dispute was finally settled.*
 The pilots began to fly the planes again.
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8. *His hotel room was not yet ready.*
 He had to wait until the maid finished cleaning it.
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9. *The last guest was gone.*
 The exhausted host and hostess went to bed immediately.
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10. *His eyes burned from the smog.*
 He felt he could not go out again that day.
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11. *The required documents did not arrive on time.*
 They had to postpone the investigation.
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Perfect Forms

HAVING OFFERED, HAVING BEEN OFFERING, HAVING BEEN OFFERED

The perfect forms refer to time completed before that of the main verb. If there is no desire to stress the completion of one time before another, the general forms may also be used.

EXAMPLE: a. *The floods had made the highway impassable.*

All cars were detoured to the side roads.

The floods having made the highway impassable, all cars were detoured to the side roads.

b. *His knife wounds had been treated by the doctor.*

The young man was released from the hospital.

His knife wounds having been treated by the doctor, the young man was released from the hospital.

1. *The interest rate had been lowered.*

More people began to take out loans from the bank.

2. *Her car had stopped suddenly in the midst of heavy traffic.*

She became frightened and did not know what to do.

3. *They had no money left for food.*

The last of their money had been spent for the rent.

4. *Their reservation had been made months in advance.*

They were annoyed to find that the hotel had no record of it.

5. *His horse had lost the race.*

He saw his whole fortune vanish.

6. *Classes had been canceled because of bad weather.*

The children watched television all day long.

7. *He was able to leave on an early train.*

His meeting had ended sooner than was expected.

8. *Traffic had been delayed because of an accident.*

They missed the first half of the play.

9. *The children had not had dinner yet.*

Their mother quickly began to prepare something for them.

10. *The lifeboats had been lowered.*
The passengers got off the sinking ship.
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8-2

ABSOLUTE CONSTRUCTIONS
WITHOUT PARTICIPLES

Being is implied in such absolute constructions. The chief word in the predicate of the absolute may be: a noun (*his book now a bestseller*), an adjective (*his book now famous*), an adverb (*his long work finally over*), a prepositional phrase (*his book now on sale at all bookstores*).

Change the italicized sentences to absolute constructions. Omit the verbs in the absolutes.

EXAMPLE: a. *The once busy factories are now completely idle.*

Many people left the town to find work elsewhere.

The once busy factories now completely idle, many people left the town to find work elsewhere.

b. *Her husband was out of work.*

She decided to get a job herself.

Her husband out of work, she decided to get a job herself.

1. *His eyes were wide open in astonishment.*

The young boy watched his physics teacher magnetize one object after another.

2. *The long hot summer was over.*

They looked forward to some beautiful fall days.

3. *The country was in a state of chaos because of the prolonged war.*

Many homeless children wandered from village to village in search of food.

4. *Her youngest son was already a famous doctor.*

She boasted about him to all her friends.

5. *Their rent was in arrears.*
They were asked to move.

6. She had always dreamed of going to a ball looking like a princess.
Her hands and neck would be resplendent with diamonds.

7. *The once powerful man was now a pauper.*
He lived by himself in a small furnished room.

8. *His fortune was the largest in the world.*
He could buy anything but happiness.

9. The tourists saw a small boy approaching them.
His clothes were almost in rags, his face was pale and emaciated.

8-3

WITH ABSOLUTE CONSTRUCTIONS

The word **with** (or its negative **without**) may initiate an absolute construction, making the construction technically a prepositional phrase and thereby relating it grammatically to the rest of the sentence. Such **with** absolutes generally have the same kinds of predicates as absolutes without **with**.

The ocean looks very beautiful **with the moonlight glimmering on its surface**.
With the police on all sides of them and ready to shoot, the bank robbers finally surrendered.

Change the italicized sentences to **with** absolute constructions. Note which of these absolutes may also be used without **with**.

EXAMPLE: a. *All the representatives were still not there.*

The meeting was postponed for several hours.

With all the representatives still not there, the meeting was postponed for several hours.

b. He was re-elected very quickly.

Not a single vote was cast in opposition.

He was re-elected very quickly, **without a single vote (being) cast in opposition**. (or, **not a single vote being cast in opposition**)

1. *The meeting was set for the following day.*

They had little time to prepare for it.

2. *Her heart was torn between her love for her husband and her love for her parents.*

She spent many sleepless nights deciding what she should do.

3. *I can't do any work at all.*

There is so much noise all around me.

4. *People come in and out of the store all day long.*

The storekeeper must watch carefully that nothing is stolen.

5. *All his money is tied up in real estate.*

He has little to invest in the stock market.

6. *A date has not been set for the wedding. (Use without)*

It is impossible for us to make any plans beforehand.

7. *All the children are at home during the holidays.*

She has a great deal of work to do.

8. *The hot sun was burning down on them hour after hour.*

The lost travelers despaired of ever getting out of the desert alive.

9. *All the roads were blocked by the soldiers.*

No one could get out of the city.

8-4

POSITION OF ABSOLUTE CONSTRUCTIONS

As loose nonrestrictive elements, the absolute constructions may occupy all three adverbial positions. However, certain types of absolutes are more likely to appear in one position rather than in another.

1. **Initial position**—*adverbial clause equivalents that express:*

- a. cause
- b. time

The table **not having been constructed properly**, one of the legs became loose.
 Dinner **(being) ready**, the hostess asked her guests to be seated.

2. **Mid-position**—*adjective clause equivalents*

The children, **many of them only infants**, were left with nothing to eat.

3. **Final position**—*coordinate clause equivalents. Such absolutes have a special kind of relationship to the first part of the sentence:*

- a. The absolute gives a further explanation of the first sentence.
- b. The absolute represents a "partitioning" of some idea mentioned in the first sentence.
- c. The absolute gives descriptive details of a broader subject mentioned in the main clause.
- d. The absolute refers to an event that occurs simultaneously with the event in the main clause.

She looks almost like her twin sister, **the only difference being that she is a little taller**.
 The men work in two shifts, **the first starting at 8 A.M., the second at 4 P.M.**
 We could see the mountain from our hotel, **its steep slopes bare of vegetation, its snow-capped peak disappearing into the clouds**.
 For a long time he lay ill in bed, **the days blending into the nights in one mass of oblivion**.

Coordinate absolutes may contain infinitives rather than participles—**They decided to row all night, all the men to take turns**.

Except for some **with** constructions, absolute constructions are usually cut off with commas. Care must be taken not to separate a final absolute construction from the preceding part of the sentence.

Change the italicized clauses or sentences to absolute constructions.

EXAMPLE: a. *Because all the restaurants were closed when they arrived, they had to go to bed hungry.*
All the restaurants being closed when they arrived, they had to go to bed hungry.

b. A few of the committee members—*among whom was the chairman*—wanted to investigate the matter immediately.

A few of the committee members—among them the chairman—wanted to investigate the matter immediately.

c. The newspaper is divided into sections.

Each is devoted to a special aspect of the news.

The newspaper is divided into sections, each devoted to a special aspect of the news.

1. *Because the required documents did not arrive on time,* they had to postpone the investigation.

2. *After the children had been fed,* their mother put them to bed.

3. The old house—*whose roof was sagging and whose windows were broken*—was finally put up for sale.

4. The dance is done with couples.
Each executes part of an intricate pattern.

5. The members of the jury could not come to a unanimous decision about the guilt of the accused.
The reason was that the evidence against the defendant was inconclusive.

6. *Because the mining operation proved unprofitable,* the company decided to abandon it.

7. The pupils marched out of the school. *The younger ones preceded the older ones.*

8. *After dinner was over,* the guests went into the living room.

9. *Because their first experiment had been remarkably successful,* they felt encouraged to continue with the other experiments.

10. They looked at each other longingly. *Neither of them spoke a word.*

11. *Because his branch library was closed for the day, he had to go to the main library to do his research.*

12. *There was complete silence in the room. Everyone was too shocked to utter a word.*

13. *The graduating students left the school.*

Some were to go on to college, some were to seek employment, the girls to find husbands.

8-5

REVIEW OF ABSOLUTE CONSTRUCTIONS

Combine the following sentences so that one sentence in each group becomes an absolute construction. Use the form of absolute suggested in the heading for each group.

With Verb

1. *The football game was called off.*

The recent storm had made the ground too wet to play.

2. *There were no taxis anywhere in sight.*

We had to walk.

3. *Our employees work in two shifts.*

The first starts at 8 A.M., the second at 4 P.M.

4. *Our ammunition was exhausted and our water supply was cut off.*

We were forced to surrender.

Without Verb

5. She sat despondently in a corner.
Her hands were over her eyes.

6. His three sons were now college graduates.
He felt he could retire from business.

7. The people kept running back and forth.
All of them were in a terrible hurry.

8. The candidate for mayor addressed the audience.
His tone was confident, forceful, cajoling.

Preceded by WITH**With the Verb**

9. She looked very pretty.
Her hair was blowing in the wind.

10. The ocean looked particularly beautiful.
The moonlight was glimmering on its surface.

Without the Verb

11. The boy came running into the room.
His face was dirty and his clothes were all torn.

12. The man contemplated suicide.

All his money was gone and his friends were nowhere in sight.

8-6

ABSOLUTE CONSTRUCTIONS USED IN PROFESSIONAL WRITING

In the following selection, absolute constructions are used to give a series of pictures. Write out the full sentence for each of the *absolutes shown within parentheses*. Use a form of **be** if no verb is included in the absolute. (In some cases the expletive **there** may need to be used.)

Once a day a cheap, gaudy packet arrived upward from St. Louis, and another downward from Keokuk. Before these events, the day was glorious with expectancy; after them, the day was a dead and empty thing. Not only the boys, but the whole village felt this. After all these years I can still picture that old time to myself now, just as it was then: (the white town drowsing in the sunshine on a summer's morning); (the streets empty, or pretty nearly so); (one or two clerks sitting in front of the Water Street stores), (with their splint-bottomed chairs tilted back against the walls), (chins on breasts), (hats slouched over their faces), asleep—(with shingle-shavings enough to show what broke them down); (a sow and a litter of pigs loafing along the sidewalk, doing a good business in watermelon rinds and seeds); (two or three lonely little freight piles scattered about the levee); (a pile of skids on the slope of the stone-paved wharf), and (the fragrant town drunkard asleep in the shadow of them); (two or three wood flats at the head of the wharf), but (nobody to listen to the peaceful lapping of the wavelets against them); (the great Mississippi, the majestic, the magnificent Mississippi, rolling its mile-wide tide along, shining in the sun); (the dense forest away on the other side). . . . Presently a film of dark smoke appears above one of those remote points; instantly a Negro drayman, famous for his quick eye and prodigious voice, lifts up the cry, "S-t-e-a-m-boat a-comin'!" and the scene changes! The town drunkard stirs, the clerks wake up, a furious clatter of drays follows, every house and store pours out a human contribution, and all in a twinkling the dead town is alive and moving. Drays, carts, men, boys, all go hurrying from many quarters to a common center, the wharf. Assembled there, the people fasten their eyes upon the coming boat as upon a wonder they are seeing for the first time.

Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi*, 1883.

EXAMPLE: the white town drowsing in the sunshine on a summer's morning
The white town was drowsing in the sunshine on a summer's morning.