

Often you can put the absolute in more than one place in a sentence because the content of the absolute prevents any confusion as to whom or what it refers and a possessive pronoun is usually found in an absolute. The following two sentences could be combined in at least a couple of ways using an absolute without any possibility of confusion:

1. Chuck wore a black leather jacket.
2. His hands were stained with grease.

#2 provides the detail of the noun “Chuck” in #1, so make #2 the absolute by cutting “were,” the “be” verb. Since the jacket obviously will not have hands and “His” obviously refers to Chuck, the absolute about Chuck’s hands could be placed in at least three different positions:

3. His hands stained with grease, Chuck wore a black leather jacket.
4. Chuck, his hands stained with grease, wore a black leather jacket.
5. Chuck wore a black leather jacket, his hands stained with grease.

If, however, the absolute shows either cause or effect, place things in chronological order:

1. She ate her spaghetti hurriedly.
2. Spots of sauce dotted^{-ing} her expensive sweater.
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She ate her spaghetti hurriedly, spots of sauce dotting her expensive sweater.

This suggests that she got spots on her sweater *because* “she ate...hurriedly.” Notice what happens if we change the order of this sentence:

Spots of sauce dotting her expensive sweater, she ate her spaghetti hurriedly.

Now it sounds like “she ate her spaghetti hurriedly” *because* she had spaghetti sauce on “her expensive sweater.”

Punctuating absolutes

Always separate an absolute from the rest of the sentence with either a comma or commas or dashes, depending on where the absolute is located in the sentence—a comma *after* if it’s introductory, a comma *before* if it’s at the end of the sentence, or commas *both before and after* if it’s within the sentence.

Practice 1

Directions: In each sentence below, underline the absolute and circle the noun about which it provides details.

1. Windows rattling and doors banging back and forth, the old barn shuddered in the storm.

2. Clarence, his slicker flopping around him and the flashlight beam showing the way, trudged across the yard.
3. A bolt of lightning ripped across the sky and lit up the yard, rain sweeping in horizontal sheets around him.
4. In the flash of light, Clarence saw the dead, towering cottonwood—its trunk rubbed bare by the cows and now smooth and gray as old bones—still standing beside the barn.
5. Thunder boomed on top of the lightning, and Clarence’s heart leaped, the flashlight slipping from his hand.

Practice 2

Directions: Combine each of the following pairs of sentences by changing one into an absolute.

1.
 - a. In the film *Gladiator*, the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius chooses Maximus as his successor.
 - b. Maximus’s leadership ability was proven on the battlefield.
2.
 - a. In retaliation, the emperor’s son Commodus kills Maximus’s family.
 - b. Commodus’s ambition drives him mad.
3.
 - a. Maximus’s fighting skills eventually win him the crowd’s approval and passage to Rome.
 - b. Maximus is captured, enslaved, and forced to become a gladiator.
4.
 - a. Maximus fights in the Coliseum where he confronts Commodus.
 - b. Commodus’s fear increases when he realizes that Maximus intends to kill him.

