Sentence Variety X: Absolutes

An absolute adds stylistic variety to a sentence by incorporating specific details into writing. It zooms in on a specific aspect of a noun or pronoun. To create an absolute, begin with two sentences. One of the sentences must describe a detail of a noun mentioned in the other sentence. Consider this example:

1. Jim checked his watch.
2. The hands glowed eerily in the dark.

The second sentence describes a detail (“the hands”) of a noun (“the watch”) mentioned in the first sentence. To create the absolute, change the sentence that describes the detail and join it to the independent clause in #1. First, change the form of the verb in #2 just as we did when creating participial phrases. In #2 above, we changed the form of the verb “glowed” to “glowing” to create an absolute:

2. The hands glowing eerily in the dark.

Now combine the absolute with #1. Usually it’s best to put it next to or near the noun the absolute describes. Since the “hands” to which the absolute refers belong to the watch rather than to Jim, put the absolute near “his watch”:

Jim checked his watch, the hands glowing eerily in the dark.

A second way to create an absolute is by removing a form of the verb “be” (is, are, was, were, am, be, being, been) from the sentence you wish to make into the absolute. Consider these two sentences:

1. I listened to the starlings.
2. Their voices were a chorus of noise.

First, decide which of the two sentences gives some detail of one of the nouns in the other sentence. Of course, #2 provides details of “the starlings,” the noun in #1. As a result, make #2 the absolute. Just as demonstrated with the first example above, look for the verb in #2: “were,” which in this case is a form of “be.” Consequently, we simply cut it:

2. Their voices were a chorus of noise.

Attach what remains as close as possible to the noun in #1 that it describes:

I listened to the starlings, their voices a chorus of noise.

Often, an absolute can be used 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.

**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.

5. a. Commodus’s jealousy and cowardice is at an all-time high.
   b. Before their climactic duel, Commodus inflicts a fatal wound on Maximus.

**Practice 3**

*Directions:* Follow the instructions for each item below to write a sentence that contains an absolute.

1. Write a sentence that starts with an absolute.

2. Write a sentence that has an absolute after the subject.

3. Write a sentence that ends with an absolute that gives a detail of a person.

4. Write a sentence that includes an absolute that gives a detail of an animal.

5. Write a sentence that includes an absolute that gives a detail of a place.