

ABLATIVE ABSOLUTE

One of the most common uses of present and perfect participles in Latin is a construction called the Ablative Absolute.

The ablatives of a participle and a noun (or pronoun) are used to form a substitute for a subordinate clause defining the circumstances or situation in which the action of the main verb occurs. The ablatives are only loosely connected grammatically to the remainder of the sentence, hence its name absolute (*absolutus* = free or unconnected).

An Ablative Absolute with a perfect passive participle is widely used in classical Latin to express the cause or time of an action:

Hīs verbīs dictīs, Caesar discēdit. *With these words having been said, Caesar departs.*

Acceptīs litterīs, Caesar discēdit. *With the letter having been received, Caesar departs.*

Leōne vīsō, fēminae discesserunt. *With the lion having been seen, the women departed.*

Equally common is an Ablative Absolute with a present active participle:

Leōne adveniente, fēmina discēssit. *With the lion approaching, the woman left.*

On occasion, another noun may take the place of the participle in the Ablative Absolute construction:

Caesare duce vincēmus. *With Caesar as leader, we shall conquer.*

Note: The noun (or pronoun) expressed in the Ablative Absolute is never the subject of the sentence. If we wish to say “When she was departing, the woman saw the lion,” we cannot use the Ablative Absolute, because the subject of each clause (“she” and “woman”) is the same. Instead, a simple participle is used: *Fēmina discēdēns leōnem vīdit.*

Because the participle in an Ablative Absolute retains its verbal force, it may govern its own direct object:

Duce militēs vocante, hostes fūgērunt. *With the general calling his soldiers, the enemy fled.*