The Ablative Absolute Construction

The Ablative Absolute is a special use of the participial phrase, and is the most efficient example of abbreviation of subordinate clauses by the use of participles.

The term absolute means that the phrase is grammatically set apart from the main clause; in other words, the participle does not modify any noun in the main clause. The literal translation begins with the preposition “with;” however, it is best always to refine the construction into an English clause.

There are three formulae for the Ablative Absolute.

1. Noun (ablative) + participle (ablative):

   Oppido capto, milites ad provinciam reverterunt.
   With the town captured, the soldiers returned to the province.
   When the town had been captured, the soldiers returned to the province.
   Because the town had been captured, the soldiers returned to the province.
Caesare ducente, populus erat laetissimus.
With Caesar leading, the nation was very happy.
While Caesar was leading, the nation was very happy.
Because Caesar was leading, the nation was very happy.
Although Caesar was leading, the nation was very happy.

Hostibus dedituris, Caesar nuntium de pace misit.
With the enemy about to surrender, Caesar sent a messenger concerning peace.
Because the enemy were about to surrender, Caesar sent a messenger concerning peace.
When the enemy were about to surrender, Caesar sent a messenger concerning peace.

Nota bene: Because there is no grammatical connection between the Ablative Absolute and the main clause, relative pronoun clauses CANNOT be used to refine this construction in English.
2. Noun (ablative) + Noun (ablative)

**Caesare imperatore**, milites fortiter pugnabant.
With Caesar as the general, the soldiers fought bravely.
With Caesar being the general, the soldiers fought bravely.
While Caesar was the general, the soldiers fought bravely.
Because Caesar was the general, the soldiers fought bravely.

3. Noun (ablative) + Simple Adjective (ablative):

**Regibus mortuis**, Brutus rem publicam creavit.
With the kings (being) dead, Brutus formed a republic.
When the kings were dead, Brutus formed a republic.
Because the kings were dead, Brutus formed a republic.

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*Nota bene:* Noun + Noun Ablatives Absolute and Noun + Adjective Ablatives Absolute must be refined to show that they are at the same time as the main verb.
Further Notes about the Ablative Absolute:

1. When refining the Ablative Absolute phrase into an English clause, the sequence of tenses rules for participles must be followed.

2. Traditionally, translations of the Ablative Absolute are permitted to be “loose,” as long as translation of vocabulary is accurate, and the sequence of tenses is correctly followed.

   **Pompejo consule**, erant multa bella.
   In the consulship of Pompey, there were many wars.
   [With Pompey being the consul]

3. The English language still has several common, surviving absolute expressions: “God willing;” “This being said;” and “All things considered” are some examples.