

Commas: Restrictive and Nonrestrictive Modifiers

Words or word groups that modify nouns and pronouns can be either restrictive or nonrestrictive. Appositives, which rename nouns or pronouns within a sentence, can also be either restrictive or nonrestrictive.

Restrictive elements (modifiers or appositives) do not require commas.

Nonrestrictive elements (modifiers or appositives) do require commas.

Restrictive Modifiers and Appositives: No Commas Required

Restrictive modifiers and appositives are essential to identifying the noun or pronoun that they modify; in other words, if these modifiers were removed, the meaning of the sentence would change.

The city that hosts Art Fair every summer has a high standard of living.

In this sentence, the modifier that hosts Art Fair every summer is restrictive. It is essential to identifying the city. Without the modifier, the sentence's meaning would be altered: The city has a high standard of living.

Ex.: Shakespeare's play Hamlet is her favorite.

In this sentence, the appositive Hamlet is restrictive. It is essential to identifying which of Shakespeare's plays the sentence is about. Without the appositive, the sentence's meaning would be altered: Shakespeare's play is her favorite.

Nonrestrictive Modifiers and Appositives: Commas Required

Nonrestrictive modifiers and appositives are not essential to identifying the noun or pronoun that they modify. If these modifiers were removed, the meaning of the sentence would not change.

Ex.: Ann Arbor, which hosts Art Fair every summer, has a high standard of living.

In this sentence, the modifier which hosts Art Fair every summer is nonrestrictive. It requires commas. It is not essential to identifying Ann Arbor. Without the modifier, the sentence's meaning would not be altered: Ann Arbor has a high standard of living.

Ex.: *Hamlet*, Shakespeare's masterpiece, is her favorite play.

In this sentence, the appositive Shakespeare's masterpiece is nonrestrictive. It requires commas. It is not essential to identifying *Hamlet*. Without the appositive, the sentence's meaning would not be altered: *Hamlet* is her favorite play.

More Examples

Here are more examples of restrictive and nonrestrictive elements. Notice the absence and presence of commas.

The college that Sonja has decided to attend is located in Michigan. (Restrictive: no commas needed)

Washtenaw Community College, which Sonja has decided to attend, is located in Michigan. (Nonrestrictive: commas needed)

Any politician who wants the vote of young people must speak out against the draft. (Restrictive: no commas needed)

Miguel Hernandez, who wants the vote of young people, has spoken out against the draft. (Nonrestrictive: commas needed)

The woman from whom I bought the car is a retired teacher. (Restrictive: no commas needed)

Evelyn Chen, from whom I bought the car, is a retired teacher. (Nonrestrictive: commas needed)

My friend Francie passed her comprehensive exam. (Restrictive: no commas needed)

My best friend, Bert, failed his. (Nonrestrictive: commas needed.)

The film actor Cary Grant was a superstar for many years. (Restrictive: no commas needed)

Cary Grant, star of many films by Hitchcock and others, is still popular today. (Nonrestrictive: commas needed)