Commas and Nonessential Modifiers

A dependent clause, phrase, or appositive may appear anywhere in a sentence. When a dependent clause, phrase, or appositive provides information that can be removed from the sentence without changing the main point, it is a nonessential. These nonessential clauses, phrases, or appositives must be set off by commas. However, if the clause, phrase, or appositive is essential, it is NOT set off by commas.

**Clauses**

Example of a Nonessential Clause
- The students, *who vary in age*, sat waiting for the instructor to arrive. [The clause is not necessary to identify the students. The important point is that students sat waiting for the instructor to arrive. It’s good to know that the students vary in age; however, the clause may be removed without changing the meaning of the sentence.]

Example of an Essential Clause
- The students *who have children* miss class frequently. [The clause helps to identify the students who miss class frequently, and it is necessary for the sentence.]

“That” and “which” differ when it comes to essential and nonessential clauses. “That” appears with essential or (restrictive) clauses, and no commas are needed; whereas, “which” will occur in nonessential (or nonrestrictive) clauses, and commas are needed.

**Nonessential Clause**
- The dog stands by its bowl, *which is empty*.

**Essential Clause**
- The car *that I hit last night* is already fixed.

**Nonessential Phrases**

Phrases can be either essential or nonessential, as well. The same comma rules apply.

Example of Nonessential Phrase
- Jamie, *writing to her mom*, realizes that her perfect career is writing fiction.

Example of Essential Phrase
- The building scheduled for demolition is not going to be replaced.
Nonessential appositives

An appositive, a word or phrase placed next to a noun to help describe it, follows the same essential/nonessential rule. As before, only place commas with nonessential appositives.

• James, *an actor*, waits tables for rent money.

At times, nonrestrictive or restrictive appositives reveal how many people exist.

Example of a Nonessential Appositive

• My brother, *Andy*, lives in Los Angles, CA.
[The commas signify that I only have one brother, which means the name of my brother is unnecessary.]

Example of an Essential Appositive

• My brother *Andy* lives in Los Angles, CA.
[The lack of commas reveals that I have more than one brother, and the name of my brother is needed to show who lives in Los Angles.]

Appositives sometimes begin with “or,” and these appositives will always be set off by commas.

• Independence Day, *or the 4th of July*, is only a week away.

When following a proper noun, abbreviated titles or degrees are considered nonessential appositives.

• John Jones, *PhD.*, will speak tomorrow on grammar.