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Comma Use with Nonrestrictive and Restrictive Clauses and Phrases

Information below is quoted or adapted from *Hodges' and Harbrace Handbook*, 13th Edition. Forthworth: Harcourt Brace, 1998 and from Penelope Choy and Dorothy Goldbart Clark's *Basic Grammar and Usage*, 7th Edition. Thompson Wadsworth, 2006

DEFINITION: Nonrestrictive clauses and phrases give nonessential information about a noun or pronoun. Because they are nonessential, these clauses and phrases can be omitted without changing meaning.

Examples:

1. Teresa Gomez, *whom you have just met*, is in charge of the program. [Teresa Gomez is in charge of the program.]
2. Black Voices, *which I am now reading*, is an anthology of African American literature. [Black Voices is an anthology of African American literature.]

RULES FOR COMMA USE WITH NONRESTRICTIVE CLAUSES AND PHRASES

Nonrestrictive clauses must be completely set off from the rest of the sentence by commas. This means that if a nonrestrictive clause is at the *end* of a sentence, it will be preceded by a comma. If it is in the *middle* of a sentence, it will be *both preceded and followed* by a comma. Nonrestrictive clauses occur at the beginning of a sentence because they must follow the noun that they describe.

DEFINITION: Restrictive clauses or phrases follow and limit the words they modify. They are essential to the clear identification of the word or words they refer to.

Examples:

1. The woman *whom you have just met* is in charge of the program. [The woman is not named and could be any woman in the world. The clause "whom you have just met" is essential, to identify which woman she is.]
2. The book *that I am now reading* is an anthology of African American literature. [Like above, the book is unnamed and could be any book in the world. The clause is essential to identify which book it is.]

Note: Though one could remove the clauses in the above examples from the sentence and still have a complete sentence, the clauses are necessary for identification of the nouns.

RULES FOR COMMA USE WITH RESTRICTIVE CLAUSES AND PHRASES

Restrictive clauses are *not* set off by commas.

Adjective Clauses that begin with who, whose, whom, which, or where

Punctuation rules:

- **Who, whose, whom, and where clauses** – are sometimes and sometimes not punctuated with commas, depending on the kind of information they supply: essential/restrictive or nonessential/nonrestrictive
- **That clause** – are never punctuated with commas
- **Which clause** – are almost always punctuated with commas



WRITING

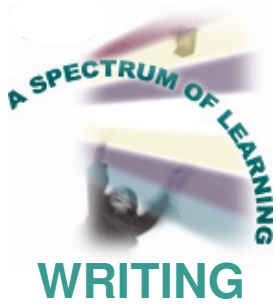
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Comma Set Off Nonrestrictive or Nonessential Information - Exercise

If you find nonessential words, phrases, or clauses in the following sentences, underline them and change or add punctuation as appropriate.

1. The play that I wanted to see opens on Thursday.
2. Each person who wants to go sledding must dress warmly.
3. The Mississippi River which is narrow enough to step across in northern Minnesota is nearly 60 meters deep and one kilometer wide just above New Orleans.
4. The cat that was hungrily watching the finch walked disappointedly away.
5. The train project which many in the government think will provide greater access to coal supplies will cause months of aggravation and strife among our citizenry.
6. The instructor who teaches water aerobics at the YMCA has an enormous amount of energy.
7. Albert Johnson who attended my yoga class decided to get a degree in Japanese philosophy.
8. The RCTC course that was most valuable to me was study skills.
9. Hockey which has been his favorite sport for years requires courage and stamina.
10. The woman who made the best chili has won the chili cook-off for the past two years.



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Comma Set Off Nonessential Information – Exercise Answers

If you find nonessential words, phrases, or clauses in the following sentences, underline them and change or add punctuation as appropriate.

1. The play that I wanted to see opens on Thursday.
2. Each person who wants to go sledding must dress warmly.
3. The Mississippi River, which is narrow enough to step across in northern Minnesota, is nearly 60 meters deep and one kilometer wide just above New Orleans.
4. The cat that was hungrily watching the finch walked disappointedly away.
5. The train project, which many in the government think will provide greater access to coal supplies, will cause months of aggravation and strife among our citizenry.
6. The instructor who teaches water aerobics at the YMCA has an enormous amount of energy.
7. Albert Johnson, who attended my yoga class, decided to get a degree in Japanese philosophy.
8. The RCTC course that was most valuable to me was study skills.
9. Hockey, which has been his favorite sport for years, requires courage and stamina.
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