

Comma usage with nonrestrictive elements

A nonrestrictive or nonessential element can be a single word, phrase, or clause. Remember, a phrase can never stand alone. They do not contain a subject or verb. A clause can be independent, meaning it can stand alone, or it can be dependent, meaning it cannot stand alone. For a clear understanding of clauses and phrases, refer to the handout entitled Clauses and the handout entitled Phrases. Nonessential or nonrestrictive elements are those elements that are not required to make meaning of a sentence—they do not limit the meaning of the word they modify. These elements may add additional information, but if you take these elements out, the meaning of the sentence is still intact. Nonessential elements can be single words, clauses, or phrases and require comma before and after.

Example: Jane, *who loves to read*, found the library. —> Note that the meaning isn't changed by removing the clause: Jane found the library.

Example: Jane, *however*, hated the library. —> If you remove the element, however, the meaning remains unchanged.

Example: The coach, *amazed*, watched the touchdown. —> Amazed is not required for this sentence.

Example: The instructor, *destroyed by the rumor*, left the academia. —> Finally, you can see that in this sentence, removing the phrase doesn't change the meaning.

Restrictive Elements, on the other hand, limit the meaning of the sentence, so when you take the element out, the meaning of the sentence is changed.

Example:

People who are charged with drinking and driving should have their license removed. —> If you remove who are charged with drinking and driving, the meaning is changed from people who are charged with drinking and driving should have their license removed to people should have their license removed. Do not use commas in sentence using restrictive or essential clauses.

The girl *rejecting the boy's proposal* walked away. —> Removing the phrase *rejecting the boy's proposal* changes the meaning to a specific girl to any girl so you do not use commas.

Editing Strategy: When you edit your paper, examine each of your sentences for added elements—clauses, words, or phrases. After you locate the added information, determine if the information is restrictive or non-restrictive. In order to determine whether an element is restrictive—limits the meaning—or whether an element is nonrestrictive—does not limit the meaning, remove the element and see if the meaning of the sentence is changed. If the meaning is changed, you do not need commas.