

# MPC English & Study Skills Center

## Commas with Adjective Clauses and Appositives

### Commas with Adjective Clauses

**Adjective clauses** are groups of words used to describe a person, place, thing, or idea. We are all familiar with **adjectives**, individual words that describe a noun, for example, *blue sky*, *juicy red apple*, and *sleepy baby*. An **adjective clause** is also used to describe a noun, but it must follow the noun that it describes.

An adjective clause is also known as a **relative clause** and usually begins with a **relative pronoun** or a **relative adverb** and contains a subject and verb.

**Note:** The **relative pronouns** are *who*, *whom*, *whose*, *which*, and *that*. Examples of **relative adverbs** are *when* and *where*. These relate, or refer back, to the noun they are describing.

Germaine, **who knows all the answers**, will pass the test.

We will visit the teachers **whom I knew many years ago**.

It is an idea **whose time has come**.

The books **that I need to return** are on the top shelf.

Paris, **which is the capitol of France**, is a favorite city for tourists.

The place **where I was born** is far away.

The holidays **when the family gets together** are the best.

It is always best to put descriptions as close as possible to the noun being described. Sometimes this involves combining sentences. Look at this pair of sentences as an example:

My neighbor works at K-mart. My neighbor is from Germany.

The sentences seem choppy and repetitive; it would be smoother to combine them using an adjective clause:

My neighbor, **who is from Germany**, works at K-mart.

Here is another example:

Kenji went to the men's clothing store. The store is in the mall.

These two sentences can be combined into a single sentence by making one of them into an adjective clause:

Kenji went to the men's clothing store **that is in the mall**.

# Essential and Non-essential Adjective Clauses

Note that in the examples above, sometimes there are commas around the adjective clause and sometimes not. This is because there are two types of adjective clauses: **essential** and **non-essential**.

Essential	Non-essential
<p>This clause is necessary to describe the noun so that the reader understands “which one.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Do <b>not</b> use commas around the clause.</li><li>• Do <b>not</b> use “which” as the relative pronoun.</li></ul>	<p>This clause is not necessary to describe the noun; it is additional information that could be left out entirely or put in parentheses.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Use commas around the clause to set it apart.</li><li>• Do <b>not</b> use “that” as the relative pronoun.</li></ul>

**Examples** of essential clauses:

The man **whom I love** left me at the altar.  
*(This one man, not the others in the world.)*

The dog **that bit me** has rabies.  
*(This particular dog, not dogs that didn't bite me.)*

The town **where I live** is near the beach.  
*(Not towns I don't live in.)*

**Examples** of non-essential clauses:

Mrs. Brown, **who is my neighbor**, went to Europe.  
*(A proper name is already considered identified, so the adjective clause is interesting but not necessary to identify the person.)*

The teacher, **whom I like**, is very difficult.  
*(I like many teachers; this isn't identifying information.)*

My mother, **who lives with me**, is 94 years old.  
*(I only have one mother, so “my mother” already identifies her.)*

 A tip for punctuation with adjective clauses:

- The word **which** is used with a comma.
- The word **that** is used without a comma.

# Commas with Appositives

An **appositive** is a noun or pronoun that renames a previous noun or pronoun. Just like adjective clauses, appositives can be **essential** or **non-essential**, depending on whether they are necessary to clarify the noun or pronoun.

**Essential appositives** are necessary and therefore are **not** set off with commas.

**Non-essential appositives** are not necessary and must be set off with commas.

Look at these examples:

- The U.S. President, Barack Obama, visited Iraq last month.

The appositive "Barack Obama" is **non-essential** because the US has only one President.

- The former U.S. President Bill Clinton is popular among Lakota people.

The appositive "Bill Clinton" is **essential** because the US has several former Presidents.

👉 Tips for testing appositives:

- Try reading the sentence using what you think is the appositive as the noun. If the sentence still makes sense, you have correctly identified the appositive. **Example:** Barack Obama visited Iraq last month.
- To tell whether the appositive is essential, ask yourself the question "Which \_\_\_\_\_?" filling in the blank with the noun. If your question is valid, then the appositive is essential to clarifying the meaning of the sentence. **For example,** "Which former U.S. President?" is a logical question, so the appositive is essential. However, "Which U.S. President?" does not make sense because the U.S. has *only one* President, so the appositive is non-essential.