Appositives—What They Are and How to Use Them

BASICS
An appositive noun or noun phrase follows another noun or noun phrase in apposition to it; that is, it provides information that further identifies or defines it. Such “bonus facts” are framed by commas unless the appositive is restrictive (i.e., provides essential information about the noun).

Appose is a very old word that one doesn’t cross paths with much except in the realms of grammar and science. It came to English from Middle French via Latin, and means “to put near, side by side, or alongside.” It doesn’t quite mean the same as oppose, but it is quite close in meaning to juxtapose. Apposition is used in medical science to describe how cell walls defend themselves by thickening themselves with layers of protection. In grammar, an element is said to be placed in apposition to another element if it provides an extra layer of description to it.

What Is an Appositive?
At its heart, an appositive is bonus information.

- Hermione Granger, a witch at Hogwarts School, is accomplished at spells.

The core of this sentence is Hermione Granger is accomplished at spells. A witch at Hogwarts School is an appositive noun phrase that gives us additional information about Hermione Granger.

- The Eiffel Tower, Gustave Eiffel’s masterpiece, can be found on the Champs de Mars. This is a sentence about where the Eiffel Tower can be found. The appositive phrase Gustave Eiffel’s masterpiece tells us a bit more about the sentence’s subject noun, Eiffel Tower.

- My childhood friend, Anne-Marie, loved horses. Here, the core sentence is My childhood friend loved horses. It works as a sentence on its own, but the appositive, the proper noun Anne-Marie, gives the reader supplemental information about my friend. It renames her.

Commas and Appositives
Appositive nouns and noun phrases are often nonrestrictive; that is, they can be omitted from a sentence without obscuring the identity of the nouns they describe. Another word for nonrestrictive is nonessential. Always bookend a nonrestrictive, appositive noun or phrase with commas in the middle of a sentence. If the noun or phrase is placed at the end of a sentence, it should be preceded by a comma.

Use Commas to Frame Nonrestrictive Elements
- Frédéric Chopin a Polish composer was one of the most celebrated virtuoso pianists of his day.
- Frédéric Chopin, a Polish composer, was one of the most celebrated virtuoso pianists of his day.
- My brother often likens himself to Zeus the god of thunder.
- My brother often likens himself to Zeus, the god of thunder.
Depending on the tone you want to achieve and the context, you may also choose either parentheses or brackets to frame a nonrestrictive appositive phrase.

- My brother often likens himself to Zeus (the god of thunder).
- My brother often likens himself to Zeus—the god of thunder.

Whichever way you choose to punctuate it, the key is to realize that My brother likens himself to Zeus is the core sentence and that the god of thunder is nonessential to that sentence. It is nice to know, but it is not essential in terms of function.

Think of a sentence with a nonrestrictive appositive in it as a motorcycle with a sidecar attached to it. The sidecar is a lovely addition to the motorcycle and changes the overall experience of taking it for a spin, but the motorcycle could go on without it. The nonrestrictive appositive is your sidecar, and it needs punctuation to attach it to the motorcycle, which is your sentence.

**Commas and Restrictive Elements Don’t Mix**

When an appositive noun or noun phrase contains an essential element without which a sentence’s meaning would materially alter, do not frame it with commas.

- My friend, Bill, owes me fifty dollars.
- My friend Bill owes me fifty dollars.

There are no commas here because Bill is an essential description of my friend. We can assume from this sentence that the speaker has many friends, but the one who owes him or her money is Bill. The unlikely circumstance under which the first sentence could be construed as correct would be if the speaker has only one confirmed friend, and that friend’s name is Bill.

Now think of a motorcycle again, except now without the sidecar. This is the restrictive appositive motorcycle. If anyone wants to hitch a ride on this motorcycle, he or she will have to ride double behind the driver. With this type of appositive, there is no disconnection between the driver and the passenger; one has his or her arms around the other. The restrictive appositive motorcycle zooms out of sight—without commas. restrictive appositive motorcycle zooms out of sight—without commas.

**Exercise: Commas with Nonessential Elements Exercise 1**

Identify the nonessential words, phrases, or clauses in the following sentences and add the appropriate punctuation.

1. Patterson Tower the recently completed office building is a monument to concrete ugliness.

2. The movie that I wanted to see is no longer playing.
3. Each person who enters the contest must send in two box tops.

4. John decided nonetheless not to buy the car.

5. The Mississippi River which once flowed north into Hudson Bay flows south into the Gulf of Mexico.

6. Your cat watching the dog intently walked carefully away.

7. The cat that was watching the dog most intently walked carefully away.

8. TV commercials sometimes the most entertaining parts of a program are essentially flashy corporate propaganda.

9. The dam project which many in the government consider to be a sign of national strength will destroy hundreds of villages and vast areas of wildlife habitat along the river banks.

10. The free-jazz musician Sun Ra claimed to be from Saturn.
Appositives

Explanation
In your essays, you often want to use long, complex sentences to draw your reader in, to avoid the choppiness that comes from a series of short sentences, and to provide clear and vivid detail. While adjectives can modify nouns (the blue car), sometimes nouns themselves—appositives—also modify nouns for the purpose of offering details or being specific. Sometimes these appositives will be called noun phrase appositives (or NPAs).

What does an appositive look like?
- It will begin with a noun or an article (a, an, the).
- As a phrase, it will not have its own subject and verb.
- They are usually set off with a comma, but occasionally are separated with a colon (:) or dash (—).

Examples:
- The car, an antique Stingray, cost ten thousand dollars.
- Martha, Beth's older sister, came to the open-mic night with her guitar.
- To the baseball game Roger brought all his goodies: balls, a glove, a hat and a sign.
- She took her medication—pain killers and cold medicine—and hid them in her suitcase.

Create Your Own Appositives
Because you may be writing a whole new sentence to give just a little piece of information to your reader, try to make your writing less choppy and repetitive by using an appositive to combine the ideas.

You might have:
- I wanted to give Droopy to the SPCA before she attacked.
- Droopy is my sister's ferocious pitbull.

which could easily be combined:
- I wanted to give Droopy, my sister's ferocious pit bull, to the SPCA before she attacked.

What happened to create the appositive? The writer noticed that the second sentence, "Droopy is my sister's ferocious pit bull" only gave more information about Droopy, who had already been introduced in the previous sentence. That additional information is dropped into the first sentence after the noun it modifies. Remember to use commas to set off the NPA.
A Note on Colons and Dashes

You may be wondering when a colon or dash is appropriate to set off an NPA. Most of the time a comma will do just fine. Sometimes, though, you will wish to call more attention to the information in apposition—draw the reader’s eyes to it—and in those instances, a dash (which is made with two hyphens “—“) may do the trick. A colon is usually used when the NPA is a series or list of items (“I brought her favorite fruit: apples, oranges and peaches.”)

Exercise 1 – Noun Phrase Appositives – Sentence Combining

Combine the following sentences using NPAs.

Example: I want to take the painting to the museum for donation. The painting is a Van Gogh.

CORRECT: I want to take the painting, a Van Gogh, to the museum for donation.

1. The lunch was cheap, served cold, and brought an hour late. The lunch was a bowl of soup.

2. Maxwell’s car topped fifty miles per hour—but barely. His car was a sleek Corvair.

3. The student body voted “no” on the resolution even though it would have benefited them explicitly. The student body is a confused group of adults whose only interest in common was the college’s location.

4. The pilot was stranded for twelve hours inside of his jet. The pilot was a former Air Force mechanic. His jet was a Cessna Skylane.

5. I want to speak on the important subjects. The important subjects are philosophy, linguistics and chemistry.

6. After six long years Alec finally achieved his lifelong goal. The goal was a scholarship to a good college.

7. Even though you’re willing to forfeit the prize, I think you should wait a week or two—until you know you won’t need the money. The prize would be my salary for a whole year.

8. The bear came to our tent, peeked in, and went on his merry way. The bear was a sleepy grizzly.

9. Camped around the fire, each of us stared at the night sky. The fire was a glowing source of warmth. The night sky was a bowl full of sparkling stars.

10. Mrs. Peterson warned us that we would have only one more day to hand in the assignment. Mrs. Peterson is my least favorite teacher.
Exercise 2 – NPAs – Sentence Combining
For each of the following sentences, add one or more NPA to give the reader additional information. Make up whatever you like! (Hint: find the noun(s) in the sentence to look to see what can take an NPA.)

Example:

• The textbook fell from my desk.

CORRECT: The textbook, a giant collection of poetry, fell from my desk.

1. My best friend lost the race.

2. Bill Clinton took first prize for his book.

3. Joanne told Larry to go for a ride on his boat.

4. Napoleon discovered the “trapple.”

5. My binder contains one hundred papers and two pamphlets.

6. The dog bit Bill in the leg before he could run into a house.

7. Her shirt nearly blinded me.

8. Abe Lincoln probably didn’t use Log Cabin syrup.

9. I like the school’s newest building.

10. Cindy took the money to the bank.
APPOSITIVE PRACTICE WORKSHEET

Name: ______________________  Class Period: ______

Part I: Identify and underline the appositive found in each sentence.

1. The monkey, a nimble animal, is often found in the jungle.
2. Dave Lewis, a teacher at Lawson, works with many aspiring musicians.
3. Before you trash BoBo, your last childhood stuffed animal, consider saving it.
4. The coast of Africa, one of the world’s largest continents, is a prosperous trading region.
5. Mr. Sonntag hired two new teachers, Mr. Davies and Ms. Parker.
6. The fastest animal, the peregrine falcon, can travel more than 100 miles per hour at certain times.
7. Our family visited The Smithsonian Institution, a vast network of galleries in Washington, D.C.
8. Our neighbor and his daughters, Parvi and Sonya, take walks every evening.
9. The giant plane, a Boeing 747, launched into the air.
10. The flashlight should be returned to Mark, the owner.

Part II. Rewrite the following sentences, adding appositive phrases as specified in parenthesis. Punctuate the appositive phrases used and underline them. (Note: You can add appositives after any noun in the sentence.)

Example: The girls went to the park. (Begin your appositive with a negation.)

Answers: The girls, not the boys, went to the park.
   or
The girls went to the park, not the museum.

11. Tom turned the car to the left. (Begin your appositive with a negation.)
12. The smugglers took the contaminated fish to market. (Begin your appositive with the word “fish.”)
13. The pilot ate his dessert while he was piloting the plane. (Begin your appositive with the pronoun “something.”)
14. The students entered the talent show. (Begin your appositive with the connective word “especially.”)
15. The woman drank tea before sleeping. (Begin your appositive with the word “tea.”)
16. The boys choose to go watch action movies. (Begin your appositive with the negation “never.”)
17. Doughnuts are often high in fat. (Begin your appositive with the pronoun “the kind.”)
18. The dinner was given by the people at the church. (Begin your appositive with the connective “mainly.”)
Part III. Directions -
- Write three sentences including appositives or appositive phrases:
  1) One sentence with an appositive beginning the sentence.
  2) One sentence with an appositive interrupting the sentence.
  3) One sentence with an appositive ending the sentence.
- Highlight the word (noun) that is renamed by the appositive or appositive phrase.
- Underline the entire appositive phrase or appositive.
- Be sure to include necessary and proper punctuation.

19. ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________

20. ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________

21. ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________

Part IV. Combine the following sentences using appositive phrases. Punctuate and underline the appositives that are used.

22. A. The California coastline is the longest of all the states.
    B. The California coastline is a national treasure.
   ________________________________________________________________

23. A. The sick elephant attacked its trainer.
    B. The sick elephant is the one in the third cage.
   ________________________________________________________________

24. A. The careless man shot a condor.
    B. The condor is the rarest bird in California.
   ________________________________________________________________

25. A. The basketball players make millions of dollars a year.
    B. Kobe makes millions of dollars a year. (Hint: Use a connective word.)
    C. Shaq makes millions of dollars a year.
   ________________________________________________________________
Exercise A  Add commas where they are needed in the following sentences. If a sentence is correct, write C on the line provided.

**EXAMPLES**  1. I have never known any other child who is as precocious as Jenny.

  2. Crater Lake, which is almost 2,000 feet deep, has no inlet or outlet.

__________  1. Anthony who won the race became the first one in our class to receive a trophy.

__________  2. My left ankle which I broke last winter is still too weak for track.

__________  3. The teacher was annoyed when Hillary who lives right across the street from school was late.

__________  4. The cats sitting in the window are called Tiger Lily and Sam.

__________  5. Our City Hall which was built in 1912 is now too small.

__________  6. Mahalia Jackson who grew up singing in a church choir became a famous gospel singer.

__________  7. Children who get everything they want often appreciate nothing.

__________  8. Anita who has no sense of humor couldn’t see what made the joke funny.

__________  9. Some people don’t enjoy any game that they don’t win.

__________  10. Have you heard of Lorraine Hansberry who was a famous playwright?

__________  11. Were Daniel’s directions which were very brief clear to you?

__________  12. Mark Twain who tried a dozen different types of jobs became a writer.

__________  13. Few people who claim to be able to predict the future can actually do so.

__________  14. Shakespeare’s father who was a merchant in Stratford served for a time as “high bailiff,” or mayor, of the town.

__________  15. Have you listened to comedians who use satire to make fun of social customs?

__________  16. Why didn’t the Brahman suspect that the tiger which was in a cage was trying to trick him?

__________  17. The Titanic which was the largest vessel of its time generated an enormous amount of publicity about its maiden voyage.

__________  18. The author Doris Lessing grew up in the African country Zimbabwe which was then called Southern Rhodesia.

__________  19. Did you know that the high-wire aerialist who is very talented has performed with the same group for ten years?

__________  20. Evan’s new job which is far more challenging than his previous job pays well and provides good benefits.
Exercise B  The subordinate clause in each of the following sentences is printed in italics. If the clause is essential, circle E. If the clause is nonessential, circle N and set the clause off with commas.

EXAMPLES  

1. The Netherlands, which has a low illiteracy rate, has a high standard of living.

2. Most sentences that ask a question require a question mark.

1. I just finished reading Gary Soto’s story “The Jacket,” which describes a painful time in his early life.

2. We need a girl who can speak with a Southern accent to play the part.

3. The store pays the parking fee of any customer who makes a purchase of twenty dollars or more.

4. It was the responsibility of Stacy Kerwin who should have counted the tickets herself.

5. Ten points are given for any question that stumps the experts.

6. Most of the things that we worry about never happen.

7. We lived on Oxford Drive which is close to the airport.

8. Any person who was born on February 29 has a birthday only once every four years.

9. Buffalo Bill whose real name was William F. Cody was a famous frontier scout.

10. Many Scottish names begin with the prefix “Mac,” which means “the son of.”

11. Mrs. Miltos is not a person with whom you can argue.

12. Grasshoppers which are one of our most destructive insect pests can leap nearly twenty times the length of their bodies.

13. We will usually accept harsh criticism from a person whom we consider a true friend.

14. Cindy who had struck out in the third inning hit a long drive.

15. Is it true that people who are good at math often make good scientists?

16. The moon which had been shining brightly suddenly disappeared behind a heavy cloud.

17. Britain which was busy with a European war paid little attention to the War of 1812 until Napoleon was defeated.

18. “Green Willow,” which I am reading for English class, is a Japanese folk tale.

19. Michael Jordan is the athlete whom I would most like to meet.

20. Many Arawaks died of diseases that European explorers brought to the West Indies.