Restrictive and Non-Restrictive Modifiers

Topic Sheet:

What is a modifier?

Modifiers enhance, describe, or add meaning to sentences they modify. There are two types of modifiers: restrictive and non-restrictive.

What is a restrictive modifier?

A restrictive modifier adds information that is essential to the sentence. If you took it out, it would change the meaning of the sentence somehow. These types of modifiers limit or restrict the part of the sentence that they modify.

People who do drugs often have premature deaths.

Notice: If we remove the restrictive modifier “who do drugs” this changes the meaning of the sentence drastically. It restricts the broad noun “people” to those “who do drugs.”

What is a non-restrictive modifier?

A non-restrictive modifier, on the other hand, adds information that is not essential to the sentence. The phrase could be taken out and the meaning would not be changed necessarily. Non-restrictive modifiers are set off from the rest of the sentence by commas.

Johnny, who was addicted to heroin, died at the early age of twenty-five.

Notice: If we remove the non-restrictive modifier “who was addicted to heroin,” the essential meaning of the sentence remains intact. This is extra information, not completely necessary.

Appositives

An appositive is a type of modifier than can be either restrictive or nonrestrictive. The appositive is a noun or noun phrase that adds extra information about the preceding noun or noun phrase.

Johnny, a terrible skier, broke his leg on a ski slope in Colorado.

More Examples:

The poet William Carlos Williams was a farmer.

“William Carlos Williams” is a restrictive modifier because it limits the meaning of “poet.” If we remove the non-restrictive modifier the meaning of the sentence changes; we don’t know which poet was a farmer and we understand the sentence differently. This is also an example of
an **appositive** because “William Carlos Williams” is a noun phrase renames the noun phrase “the poet.”

*William Carlos Williams, the poet, was a farmer.*

“The poet” is a non-restrictive modifier because it is extra information. We already know who was a farmer; the fact that he was a poet is inessential information. This is another example of an **appositive**, because “the poet” is a noun phrase that renames “William Carlos Williams” another noun phrase.

**Usage:**

When trying to decide if a modifier needs commas or not (restrictive vs. non-restrictive), ask yourself if it contains information necessary to the sentence. If we remove the modifier, is the meaning of the sentence changed in some way? If yes, it is a restrictive modifier and *does not* need commas; if not, it is a non-restrictive modifier and *does* need commas.

**GIC List**

**Restrictive Modifiers**

“Rudolph **the red-nosed reindeer** had a very shiny nose.”

Tracy Lord: "Mac **the night watchman** is a prince among men, Uncle Willie is a... pincher. Upper and lower my eye. I'll take the lower, thanks." -The Philadelphia Story, 1940

"For his documentary project, professional photographer **Doug Menuez** uses Aperture 3 to manage his photos." [Apple.com]

"Frosty **the snowman** was a jolly happy soul."

Hollywood columnist **Hedda Hopper** introduced the Taylors to Andrea Berens, the fiancée of Cheever Cowden, chairman and major stockholder of Universal Pictures. - Wikipedia exert from Elizabeth Taylor

**Nonrestrictive Modifiers**

"The students and the Negro and the drifter, **along with ten or twelve others**, took seats at three vacant tables." - *Lunching at the Ritzmore*, 1942

"When Tomie graduated from high school, he went to Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York, **where his twin cousins, Franny and Fuffy, had previously attended art school.**" -Tomie.com, Biography

"Software development, **like professional sports**, has a way of making 30 year old men feel decrepit." - Snow Crash by Neal Stephenson

"**In the end**, the greatest snowball isn't a snowball at all. It's fear. Merry Christmas."
- Dwight, "Classy Christmas," *The Office*

Hollywood columnist Hedda Hopper introduced the Taylors to Andrea Berens, the fiancée of Cheever Cowden, chairman and major stockholder of Universal Pictures. - Wikipedia

"The latest of these housekeepers was Mrs. Clay, who took care of our narrow seventeenth century townhouse on the Raamgracht, a canal in the heart of the old city." - *The Historian* by Elizabeth Kostova

"It was times like these when I thought my father, who hated guns and had never been to any wars, was the bravest man who ever lived." - *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee

“It was a grand old house, the Ayemenem House, but aloof-looking.” *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy

**Instructional Videos:**

**Modifiers: Grammar Referee**

**Appositives**

**Activities:**

- “Confection Connection: Using Sensory Details in Writing”


  In this activity, children use two pieces of candy to explore descriptive writing. One piece is used as a hands-on aid to complete a sensory graphic organizer. This information is used to help children write a descriptive paragraph about the candy. When done, children give their writing piece and the second piece of candy to a friend to read and eat. The activity can be limited to using only modifiers (restrictive or nonrestrictive) to describe the candy.

- “I am Poem”

  Students will write a poem about an object of their choosing or a series of objects. They will start each line with the phrase “I am...” and will then name/rename the object and describe it by using a modifier, either restrictive or nonrestrictive depending on what you want to emphasize.


- “Grammar and Art”
Students will be given a picture of an object taken out of a magazine or online along with a very simple description of the object in paragraph form. Students will be tasked with adding description to the paragraph by adding modifiers to the paragraph. After students have completed the activity, they will share their paragraphs as a class, picking at least on sentence in which they added a particularly interesting modifier.

- **“Modification Monsters”**

  Students will create/draw their own monsters or find pictures of interesting monsters online. They will be asked to write a brief narrative about the monster: name, where it lives, what it eats, daily habits/activities, etc… and (most importantly) a description of the monster. Once students have created a draft of the narrative, they will be tasked with revising the story by adding as many descriptive modifiers as possible to make the story more colorful and enjoyable to read. We will share stories as a class, pointing out especially nice modifiers that worked well to describe the monsters.

- **“Modifiers in Literature”**

  Students will be given samples of literature: short stories, novels, poetry, etc… (this will work well with the literature the class is covering at the time of lesson). In groups, they will look through their assigned excerpt or piece of literature for examples of modifiers. The group will decide which example of a modifier they found most interesting and will write their example on the board. As a class, we will discuss the examples as far as structure, usage, effect, relationship to the large piece of literature, etc…

- **Appositive Name Activity, by Cayce O’Connor**

  Students will be given the meanings for their own names and will be tasked with incorporating their name’s meaning into a sentence about themselves in the form of an appositive.