

Emphasis: putting commas, dashes, and parentheses into perspective—

Earlier when we discussed **non-restrictive elements** in sentences, it was noted that commas are required to set apart such elements from the main clause. Commas always give a **neutral emphasis** on non-restrictive elements. In other words, the information is seen as neither strong nor weak; it is equal in all ways to the main clause it is attached to.

Examine the following three sentences. The non-restrictive element in the sentence is identical except for punctuation. Though each sentence says exactly the same thing, the punctuation is what determines the **emphasis**: neutral, strong, or weak.

<i>My dad, who just turned sixty, plays golf four days a week.</i>	<i>Neutral</i>
<i>My dad—who just turned sixty—plays golf four days a week.</i>	<i>Strong</i>
<i>My dad (who just turned sixty) plays golf four days a week.</i>	<i>Weak</i>

Sentence one: commas are used with the non-restrictive element. Readers will view the information with indifference. In other words, the fact that dad just turned sixty neither emphasizes nor de-emphasizes the significance of his golfing habits.

Sentence two: dashes are used with the non-restrictive element. Readers will view the information with authority. By using dashes, the author puts the emphasis on dad's advancing age and how amazing it is that he can engage physical activities as often as he does.

Sentence three: parentheses are used with the non-restrictive element. Readers will view the information as inconsequential. By using parentheses, the author puts the emphasis on the main clause alone. The only important information he wants to convey is that his dad plays golf four times a week—his age is completely irrelevant in the discussion.

Practice!

Even though using commas to indicate non-restrictive elements in sentences is always correct, there are times when dashes or parentheses are better choices. *Use the tools available to make sure one's audience reads exactly what you want them to read in exactly the fashion in which you want them to read.* The tools for writing are not any less adept at proper communication than the tools of speaking. The one who masters the tools of writing is the one who becomes the true communicator.

Highlight or underline the main clauses in each sentence (I did the first and last one). Each sentence contains non-restrictive elements (clauses, phrases, etc) that require some sort of punctuation: neutral, strong, or weak. Based on the information in the main clause, decide how you should emphasize the elements.

This is a very subjective assignment: different people are going to view these sentences in different ways. There is more than one right answer for almost all of these (though some will certainly make more sense with one method than with another); however, if someone hands in a paper loaded with nothing but commas, I will give that person a zero. The idea with this exercise is to familiarize students with how to use the language to convey understanding in effective ways and to provide variety and sophistication in writing.

Name: _____

Date: _____

- 1) Jack and Jill two storybook characters went up a hill to fetch a pail of water.
- 2) Barney Fife I know this for a fact only carried one bullet in his gun.
- 3) Winter nights can be cold, lonely affairs especially if you forgot to pay the gas bill.
- 4) When I graduate from high school hopefully it won't take more than four years I plan to use my impressive communication skills to write a quality résumé.
- 5) Alice Walker author of *The Color Purple* wrote the short story, "Everyday Use."
- 6) No one and I mean no one can make a yard prettier than our gardener who used to work for Donald Trump.
- 7) My English teacher who is totally awesome has taught me more about writing than any teacher I have ever had.
- 8) Sam my dog loves to go fishing with me.
- 9) My friend Earl lives three doors down we call him Kryptonite.
- 10) When I woke up this morning, my mother had breakfast ready sausage and eggs, but since it took my sister a whole hour in the bathroom to get ready nothing unusual there I had to skip breakfast so I wouldn't miss the bus.
- 11) Joan Rivers has had so much plastic surgery that she can use her head as a milk jug. I don't think I'll ever have plastic surgery though I might change my mind when I'm nine-hundred-years old like she is.
- 12) Slavery all aspects of it is a vile practice that robs people of their natural right to life.
- 13) George Washington a former President of the United States said he could never tell a lie how ironic considering today's politicians.
- 14) Our dog which is barely bigger than a shoe beat the sweet-mustard-crap out of our neighbor's Pit Bull Godzilla. And here I thought I'd seen everything guess I was wrong.
- 15) I think I have a pretty good idea about non-restrictive elements devices in a sentence that are non-essential to meaning; in fact, I plan to use these concepts the next time I write something hopefully that will be soon