

Parenthetical wording

Skillful writers set apart and de-emphasize non-restrictive wording using commas. Parenthetical wording is also set apart by commas, but is not de-emphasized. Instead, the visual separation suggests an aside, explanation, or afterthought. Comma pairs, or commas that sandwich wording, then, can de-emphasize or separate and in some cases even emphasize. Writers must become comfortable with the fluidity of meaning offered by commas used in this way.

Tom Kinsella 1/29/11 2:00 PM

Comment [1]: Isn't this a kicker?

Examples of parenthetical wording

1. The biggest problem, he had thought, was going to be getting the piano onto the motorbike.
2. Who would notice, at first glance, that the instrument was even gone?
3. The theft, they supposed, happened during the three-hour lunch break.

Four sample sentences

Explain why you consider the separated wording to be non-restrictive or parenthetical.

4. The gas station attendant, having stepped aside to eat a donut, watched the tire flatten.

{I think you might go either direction with this participial phrase, after all eating a donut is not too important and could be easily considered non-restrictive. I lean toward parenthetical, though, because the eating of the donut can be seen as important to characterizing the attendant.}

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5. The young woman, who had just come from church, stepped out of the car and cursed under her breath.

{Another tricky one. Under normal circumstances I would consider the relative phrase non-restrictive, but the action of cursing becomes ironic in the light of her churchgoing, so it seems important. But if the relative clause is considered restrictive, and thus not punctuated, then the delicious twist comes too quickly and is lessened. I like this punctuated as is and am calling this parenthetical. What do you think?}

6. The attendant with the donut, unhappy about the situation, walked back to the pumps.

{This is parenthetical; it is a punctuating an aside that is presenting significant information.}

7. The situation, as it unfolded, made the god-fearing man ever more hungry.

{Here's another parenthetical, this time a clause, that might also be seen as non-restrictive.}