



THE UNIVERSITY
WRITING CENTER
3211 HHRA BUILDING

APPOSITIVES

Related Handouts: THE COMMA, THE COLON

THE PRINCIPLE

Appositives are nouns or noun phrases that are placed beside other nouns in order to rename them or to elaborate on their meaning.

Ex: My favorite sport, **road biking**, has become enormously popular.

Appositives add information to help define the nouns they modify, but they are not grammatically essential to the meaning of the sentence. (You could remove the appositive “road biking” from the example above and still have a complete sentence.) As a result, appositives should be set off from the rest of their sentence with **commas**, dashes, or sometimes **colons**.

An appositive can begin, end, or be in the middle of a sentence, but it should remain close to the noun it modifies.

THE PROBLEM

Here are some sentences with appositives, but the appositives are not punctuated correctly. The appositives and incorrect punctuation are underlined.

A completely enjoyable pastime road biking is on the increase.

Road biking sometimes a dangerous endeavor, is the transportation of choice for many commuters.

I love road biking despite the hazards potholes, loose gravel, broken glass, and the occasional bad driver who refuses to share the road.

THE SOLUTION

- 1) If an appositive occurs *before* the noun it describes (before the subject of the sentence), set it off with a **comma**:

A completely enjoyable pastime, road biking is on the increase.

- 2) If the appositive occurs in the *middle* of the sentence, *set it off on both sides with the same punctuation*--either dashes or commas.

Road biking, **sometimes a dangerous endeavor**, is the transportation of choice for many commuters.

Dashes—the more striking form of punctuation—tend to add emphasis to the appositive:

Road biking—**sometimes a dangerous endeavor**—is the transportation of choice for many commuters.

- 3) If the appositive occurs at the *end* of the sentence, you can set it off with a comma, a dash (for extra emphasis), or a **colon**. *The colon is necessary if the appositive following the sentence consists of a list of items, as in this example:*

I love road biking despite the hazards: **potholes, loose gravel, broken glass, and the occasional rude driver who refuses to share the road.**

But if the appositive coming at the end of the sentence is just a single noun or a short phrase, you can choose either a comma, a dash, or a colon, depending on the emphasis you want to create:

Because of the dangers, I would never ride without my most important piece of equipment, **my helmet.**

Because of the dangers, I would never ride without my most important piece of equipment--**my helmet.**

Because of the dangers, I would never ride without my most important piece of equipment: **my helmet.**

So, to review:

- 1) Always use a comma if the appositive is at the beginning of the sentence.
- 2) Use either commas or dashes if the appositive is in the middle, but don't mix them; use *either* commas before and after the appositive *or* dashes before and after it.
- 3) Use a comma, dash, or colon if the appositive comes at the end of the sentence. Always choose a colon if the appositive at the end of the sentence consists of a list. (But never use a colon if the appositive occurs at the beginning or in the middle of the sentence.)