Nonessential Elements
Contributors: UWC Staff

Nonessential words and phrases are elements of a sentence which do not contain information essential to the meaning of the sentence as a whole.

For example:

Jan, the second of three children, always feels left out.

Here, “Jan always feels left out” is the main clause and “the second of three children” is the nonessential phrase. We can move nonessential elements to different parts of a sentence, which can make these elements essential to the meaning.

For example:

Jan always feels left out because she is the second of three children.

One way to identify whether or not a word or phrase is nonessential is to determine whether or not the sentence works without it. In the following examples, the potentially nonessential element has been italicized and bolded.

1. The woman who owns the local bookstore claims to have seen a unicorn.
2. Anita, who owns the local bookstore, claims to have seen a unicorn.
3. Anita owns the local bookstore, and she claims to have seen a unicorn.
4. At the bookstore which she owns, Anita told me she has seen a unicorn.

In sentence 1, the phrase identifies which woman claims to have seen a unicorn; it clarifies the subject of the sentence, so it’s not a nonessential clause. In sentences 2, 3, and 4, however, the italicized phrase is nonessential because it has no relevance to the sentence.

While all of these sentences contain the same information, they are all structured differently. If we try to move the nonessential element to a different part of the sentence without rephrasing the sentence, the meaning changes.

For example: 2. Anita claims to have seen a unicorn who owns the local bookstore. Who owns the local bookstore, Anita claims to have seen a unicorn. Anita claims to have seen, who owns the local bookstore, a unicorn.

While these phrases are not essential to the meaning of the sentence, moving them around can change the meaning of the sentence.