Modifying Nouns with Appositives

Among the words that can be modify nouns are nouns themselves. For instance, we sometimes use noun modifiers next to (before or after) the nouns they describe.

The cab driver opened the door for his passenger, a tall woman in a strapless red dress.

*Woman* is a noun that makes it clear to the reader who the passenger is; the word *woman* plus the modifiers *tall* and *in a strapless red dress* rename passenger in a specific way. We call the underlined descriptive phrase an appositive, which is a word or phrase containing a noun that renames the noun it modifies.

More Examples:

My best friend, a cat with a loud purr, always knows how to cheer me up.

She went to see Humphrey Bogart in a romance movie, the fifth one she’d seen in a week.

Marvin, a straight A student in chemistry, ignited his lab partner’s hair with the bunson burner, a device Marvin should never have touched.

# Punctuation with Appositives

Set off single modifying phrases with commas:

Carlos met his girlfriend at the health club, the local hangout.

If the appositive comes in the middle of a sentence, enclose it in commas:

Carlos met his girlfriend, a local disc jockey, at the health club.

Set off a series of appositives with dashes:

Carlos and his girlfriend enjoy similar things – cartoons, Diet Coke, spandex leotards, and mirrors.

Their friends – sun-tanned gods and goddesses, the state’s best aerobic instructor, and a local DJ – like to get together to party.

Or use a colon to set off a list of appositives at the end of a sentence:

Bart wrote the following items on his shopping list: Frostie Fritters Cereal, strawberry milk, hotdogs, canned dog food, and paper towels.