



# To Comma Or Not to Comma



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## Punctuation of Adjective Clauses

When the adjective clause is the last element in the sentence, only the comma before it is necessary.

When the adjective clause is a middle element in the sentence, two commas enclose it.

**Remember:** Use “which” or “that” for things, and “who/whom” or “that” for people.

<b>Use Commas:</b> (Essential Clauses—“who” and “which” are OK, but do not use “that”)	<b>Do Not Use Commas:</b> (Non-essential Clauses—“who,”“which” or “that” are all OK)
When the antecedent (the thing the clause refers to) is limited in itself (i.e., the following clause is non-essential):	When the antecedent is limited by the following adjective clause (i.e., the clause is essential):
Antecedent is a proper noun: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Everyone envied <b>Carole, who</b> had just won the lottery.</li> </ul>	Antecedent is a common noun: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Everyone envied <b>the woman who/that</b> had just won the lottery.</li> </ul>
Antecedent is one of a kind: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Even <b>Bobbie’s father, who</b> is usually reserved, has to smile proudly at his child’s success.</li> </ul>	Antecedent is not unique: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Even <b>a father who</b> is usually reserved has to smile proudly at his child’s success.</li> </ul>
Antecedent is restricted by the preceding context: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ I had to get a new computer. <b>The computer, which</b> is actually a used one, should work just fine.</li> </ul>	Antecedent is generic (non-specific) or mentioned for the first time: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>A computer which</b> is actually a used one should work just fine.</li> </ul>
When the antecedent includes <b>all</b> of a group: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>The students, who</b> had been acting up all day, protested their detention.</li> </ul>	When the antecedent includes only <b>some</b> of a group: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>The students who/that</b> had been acting up all day protested their detention.</li> </ul>

**NOTICE** that in the case of essential adjective clauses, the clause is necessary to know which thing is being referred to. For example, in the first example in column two, if the sentence were simply, “Everyone envied the woman,” the reader might wonder, “Which woman?” The answer would be, “The woman who had won the lottery.” On the other hand, in the first example in column one, presumably the reader will know who Carole is (otherwise the writer would not have used her name), so the information in the adjective clause is not necessary (not essential) to identify Carole; in this case, the information in the adjective clause is just extra information.

**SO:** Extra information: Use commas.  
Essential information: Don’t use commas.