

Words of Wisdom: The Parenthetical

November 2010

By Shari Broussard, Vice-President

A parenthetical is an element - - word, phrase, or clause
- - that is not essential to the meaning of the sentence.

There are two ways to identify most parentheticals:

1) A parenthetical element can be moved around within the sentence without changing the meaning or the structure of the sentence.

2) A parenthetical element can be dropped into any sentence that might be said, and the sentence will make sense.

If an element can be used in these two ways, it is a parenthetical and needs punctuation around it, no matter where it is in the sentence. Below are some examples that will help you identify what is a parenthetical.

Rule 1: Always surround a parenthetical with punctuation, wherever it appears in the sentence.

Ex: When, at any rate, did you get the new documents?

Rule 2: Put a period after a strong interjection.

Ex: Damn. I forgot to bring my lunch.

Rule 3: Surround a mild interjection with punctuation, usually commas.

Ex: I was, well, really busy, you know, working on a transcript.

Rule 4: Surround a neutral remark with punctuation, usually commas, wherever it occurs.

Ex: As you understand it, why did they not book the job with Capital?

Words of Wisdom: The Parenthetical

November 2010

By Shari Broussard, Vice-President

Rule 5: Surround numbers and letters to denote items in a list with punctuation, usually commas.

Ex: It was, first, too expensive and, second, too much work and, last, too boring.

Rule 6: When the parenthetical is followed by a fragment, use commas around the parenthetical.

Ex: I am sure it was a large truck, that is, Suburban.

Rule 7: When the parenthetical is followed by a complete sentence, put a semicolon in front of the parenthetical and a comma after it.

Ex: I am sure it was a large truck; that is, it was a Suburban.

Rule 8: When the parenthetical is followed by a list, put a colon in front of the parenthetical and a comma after it.

Ex: We toured three states: that is, California, Washington, and Utah.

Rule 9: When the parenthetical and the appositive are at the end of the sentence and the appositive renames something at the beginning of the sentence, put a dash in front of the parenthetical and a comma after it.

Ex: That is exactly what we had discussed and agreed to - - that is, that he would use realtime on his next deposition.

Rule 10: When the parenthetical is in the middle of the sentence, put a dash before the parenthetical and a comma after it, and put a dash after the appositive.

Ex: I saw her later that evening - - that is, around 9:00 - - and did not see her again.

Rule 11: When a question is followed by a parenthetical, which is then followed by a second question or clarifying information, put an interrog after the question. Put a comma after the parenthetical and a period or an interrog at the end of the second element, depending on the intonation you hear as it is said.