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Definition

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circumscribe verb

cir-cum-scribe ('sər-kəm-,skrīb ◀▶)

circumscribed; circumscribing; circumscribes

[Synonyms of circumscribe >](#)

transitive verb

- 1 a** : to constrict (see [CONSTRUCT sense 1](#)) the range or activity of definitely and clearly
| his role was carefully *circumscribed*
- b** : to define or mark off carefully
| a study of plant species in a *circumscribed* area
- 2 a** : to draw a line around
| *circumscribed* the misspelled words
- b** : to surround by or as if by a boundary
| fields *circumscribed* by tall trees
- 3** : to construct or be constructed around (a geometrical figure) so as to touch as many points as possible
a circle *circumscribing* a square

Did you know?

To circumscribe something is to limit its size, activity, or range, but the range of influence of the Latin ancestors of *circumscribe* knows no bounds. *Circumscribe* comes via Middle English from the Latin verb *circumscribere* (which roughly translates as “to draw a circle around”), which in turn comes from *circum-*, meaning “circle,” and *scribere*, meaning “to write or draw.” Among the many descendants of *circum-* are *circuit*, *circumference*, *circumnavigate*, *circumspect*, *circumstance*, and *circumvent*. *Scribere* gave us such words as *scribe* and *scribble*, as well as *ascribe*, *describe*, and *transcribe*, among others.

Synonyms of *circumscribe*

Relevance

- limit
- restrict
- confine


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- 3 **pronoun**
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LIMIT, RESTRICT, CIRCUMSCRIBE, CONFINE mean to set bounds for.

LIMIT implies setting a point or line (as in time, space, speed, or degree) beyond which something cannot or is not permitted to go.

| visits are *limited* to 30 minutes

RESTRICT suggests a narrowing or tightening or restraining within or as if within an encircling boundary.

| laws intended to *restrict* the freedom of the press

CIRCUMSCRIBE stresses a restriction on all sides and by clearly defined boundaries.

| the work of the investigating committee was carefully *circumscribed*

CONFINE suggests severe restraint and a resulting cramping, fettering, or hampering.

| our choices were *confined* by finances

Examples of *circumscribe* in a Sentence

The circle is **circumscribed** by a square.

circumscribed his enthusiasm so as not to make the losing side feel worse

Recent Examples on the Web

i Examples are automatically compiled from online sources to show current usage. [Read More](#)

Each of Cicellis's young protagonists arrives at the grim realization that their life is **circumscribed** not by a god but by the pull of obligation to an undeserving parent or mentor.

—Rachel Vorona Cote, *The Atlantic*, 5 Jan. 2026

Ed's high-paying job allows (or relegates) Jess to be a stay-at-home mum, her life devoted to (and **circumscribed** by) her children.

—Judy Berman, *Time*, 10 Dec. 2025

Although the president's pardon power is enshrined in the Constitution, Congress should move to **circumscribe** it around a few basic principles: No pardons should be permitted in exchange for anything of value.

—Bloomberg Opinion, *Twin Cities*, 27 Nov. 2025

An aesthetic distinction to **circumscribe** this immoral, unethical moment in a durational imperialist history.

—*Literary Hub*, 17 Nov. 2025



Word History

Etymology

Middle English *circumscriven*, from Latin *circumscribere*, from *circum-* + *scribere* to write, draw — more at [SCRIBE](#)

First Known Use

15th century, in the meaning defined at [sense 1a](#)

Time Traveler

The first known use of *circumscribe* was in the 15th century

[See more words from the same century](#)

Rhymes for *circumscribe*


diatribe	ascribe	describe
imbibe	inscribe	prescribe
proscribe	subscribe	transcribe
bribe	gibe	jibe

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Kids Definition

circumscribe verb

cir-cum-scribe 'sər-kəm-,skɪrb

circumscribed; circumscribing

- 1 **a** : to limit the range or activity of definitely and clearly
 - b** : to define or set limits for carefully
- 2 **a** : to draw a line around
 - b** : to put a boundary around

Etymology

from Latin *circumscribere* "to draw a line around, set limits to," from *circum* "around" and *scribere* "to write, draw" — related to [SCRIBE](#)

More from Merriam-Webster on *circumscribe*

English: [Translation of circumscribe for Spanish Speakers](#)

Last Updated: 7 Jan 2026 - Updated example sentences



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