



The Writing Center

Restrictive and Non-Restrictive Clauses



A **clause** is a group of words consisting of a noun and a verb which may or may not be a complete sentence. A clause can be a whole sentence, as in: “I slept”. However, an example of a clause that is not a sentence would be: “After I finished my homework.” A sentence is always a complete thought, and this clause needs us to say what happens after he/she finished his/her homework in order to be a complete sentence.

Depending on the information contained within a clause, it can be either **restrictive** or **nonrestrictive** (essential or nonessential). A restrictive clause introduces information that is necessary to the meaning of the sentence. A nonrestrictive clause can be removed without changing the meaning. Restrictive clauses require no punctuation; nonrestrictive clauses are usually separated from the independent clause with commas.

Restrictive Clauses

Restrictive clauses are essential to the meaning of the sentence; without them, the meaning of the sentence would be different.

Restrictive/essential Clauses

- follow a general noun
- do not use commas

Examples of Restrictive Modifiers

The words in bold indicate the modifier (clause).

- The child **who is running around the room** is my niece.
- I bumped into the child **who was running around the room**.

- The book **that I finished reading yesterday** was really fascinating.
- I just finished reading a book **that was fascinating**.

- The city **that I want to visit the most** is Shanghai.
- Shanghai was **the best city that I visited** in all of Asia.

More Examples and Explanations (noun as a modifier)

Her sister Carmen won the top scholarship.

- This is restrictive – no commas – because she has more than one sister; the restrictive modifier identifies *which* sister.

Mr. Smith the banker got a promotion recently.

- This is restrictive – no commas – because the speaker knows more than one Mr. Smith; the restrictive modifier identifies which banker.



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Non-restrictive Clauses

A **non-restrictive** clause adds information that is **not essential** to the understanding of the sentence. If the modifier is removed from the sentence, the basic meaning does not change, so **commas are used**. In other words, these secondary or less important pieces of information are often set off by commas.

Non-Restrictive/Non-essential Clauses

- follow a specific noun
- use commas

Examples of Non-Restrictive Modifiers

The words in bold indicate the modifier (clause).

- My niece, **who was running around the room**, had too much sugar earlier.
- I scolded my niece, **who was misbehaving this morning**.
- *Like Water for Chocolate*, **which was an excellent book**, was made into a movie.
- I finished reading *Like Water for Chocolate*, **which was made into a movie**.
- Barcelona, **which I visited last year**, has a lot of interesting architecture.
- Professor Shevchenko, **who is my teacher**, has been at this college for 25 years.

More Examples and Explanations (noun as a modifier)

Her sister, Carmen, won the top scholarship.

- This is non-restrictive – with commas – because she only has one sister; her name, Carmen, is a non-restrictive modifier which provides additional information.

Mr. Smith, the banker, got a promotion recently.

- This is non-restrictive – with commas – because the speaker knows that there is only one Mr. Smith in this case; the non-restrictive modifier, “the banker” provides extra information about him.



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Which or That?

In spoken English, the words “which” and “that” are often used interchangeably to introduce a clause that further defines or modifies a noun within the sentence. However, in academic writing these two words distinguish two different types of clauses: the restrictive clause and the non-restrictive clause.

Restrictive Clauses:

Any phrase beginning with “that” and following a noun is a restrictive clause because this phrase “restricts” the meaning or specificity of the noun.

Example: Insects that have eight legs are called ‘arachnids.’

In this example, only those insects that have eight legs can be categorized this way. All other insects are categorized differently. The phrase “that have eight legs” therefore restricts the type of insect indicated in the sentence.

Non-restrictive Clauses:

By comparison, any phrase beginning with “which” and following a noun is a non-restrictive clause because the phrase does not change the meaning of the noun in any way, but only adds additional information to that noun.

Example: Spiders, which are a type of insect, are often venomous.

Practice Exercises:

Determine if the following sentences should have restrictive clauses using “that” or non-restrictive clauses using “which.”

- 1) University College that/,which is the oldest building on campus, was constructed in 1923.
- 2) The red car over there is the one that/,which scratched your fender.
- 3) The cat that/,which I saw in our yard yesterday is in the neighbor’s yard today!
- 4) Hockey that/,which is the most popular sport in Canada, will be an event in the next Olympics.
- 5) The pen that/,which I had in my pocket exploded and covered me in ink!

The rule of thumb, then, is that **which clauses** are nonrestrictive (nonessential) while **that clauses** are restrictive (essential). Nonrestrictive clauses and phrases are set off from the rest of a sentence by a pair of commas (as in our examples above) or by a single comma if they come at the end of the sentence. (Example: "I took a vacation day on my birthday, which happened to fall on a Monday this year.")

References

Western Writing Support Centre handout on “which vs. that.”

Answers:
1) University College, which is the oldest building on campus, was constructed in 1923.
2) The red car over there is the one that scratched your fender.
3) The cat that I saw in our yard yesterday is in the neighbor’s yard today!
4) Hockey, which is the most popular sport in Canada, will be an event in the next Olympics.
5) The pen that I had in my pocket exploded and covered me in ink!