

Restrictive and Non-Restrictive Clauses

Non-restrictive means – extra
– non-essential to the meaning
– interesting, helpful, but not necessary
– does not limit or define the word it modifies
– therefore, it can be bracketed off by commas

Restrictive means – necessary
– essential to the meaning
– limits or defines the word it modifies
– therefore, it should not be bracketed off by commas

Some examples of various types of restrictive and non-restrictive clauses:

non-restrictive RELATIVE CLAUSE:

Audrey, who habitually bragged about her car, was upset by the scratch on the fender.

restrictive RELATIVE CLAUSE:

People who habitually brag about their cars often get upset over minor scratches.

non-restrictive VERBAL PHRASE (adjectival):

Her instructor, discussing the project, forgot to distribute the syllabi.

restrictive VERBAL PHRASE (adjectival):

Meetings called by the president take first priority.

non-restrictive pronoun as APPOSITIVE:

The luncheon was attended by the eighteen women, they.

restrictive pronoun as appositive:

By definition, this kind of clause cannot exist because an appositive is a word or group of words which can be set off by commas because it is "extra information."

The following adjective clauses are included to make the point that only the writer, operating within a given context, really knows if a clause is restrictive or non-restrictive:

non-restrictive ("extra") ADJECTIVE CLAUSE:

Joe's exercises, which strengthen his back, cannot be omitted.

The microcomputers, which arrived yesterday, must be checked.

She ignored the student, who asked the question.

KNOW
THE
CONTEXT

restrictive (not just "extra") ADJECTIVE CLAUSE:

Joe uses exercises that will strengthen his back.

The microcomputers which arrived yesterday must be checked.

She ignored the student who asked the question.

KNOW
THE
CONTEXT