



---

---

## Nonrestrictive and Restrictive Words, Phrases and Clauses

---

---

**Overview:**

Understanding different groups of words that make up sentences will help you to create sentences that are clear, concise, and convey exactly the meaning you intend. It will also help you to create a variety of **sentence types**, which helps make your writing stylistically interesting. Important to this understanding is knowledge of the differences between **nonrestrictive and restrictive words, phrases and clauses**, which are also called **nonessential and essential words, phrases and clauses**. Because nonrestrictive elements of a sentence are separated from the rest of the sentence by **commas**, recognizing the difference between restrictive and nonrestrictive words, phrases and clauses will also help you determine when to use commas.

### Nonrestrictive vs. Restrictive

**Nonrestrictive** (also called “nonessential”) elements of a sentence are *not* necessary to the meaning of the sentence. If you were to remove the nonrestrictive word, phrase or clause, the sentence would still have the same meaning. Nonrestrictive words, phrases and clauses serve to add extra detail to a sentence without changing its meaning, and are marked by **commas**.

You may have guessed, then, that **restrictive** (also called “essential”) elements of a sentence *are* necessary to the meaning of the sentence; as the name suggests, they *restrict* the sentence to a particular meaning. If you were to remove the restrictive word, phrase or clause, the sentence would have a different meaning. Restrictive words, phrases and clauses do *not* require commas.

Consider the following examples where the **nonrestrictive word, phrase or clause** is in *italics*:

- A) Francesca’s husband, *Nathan*, accompanied her to the poetry reading.

Here, *Nathan* is nonrestrictive because, while it offers an extra detail about Francesca’s husband, it is not necessary to the meaning of the sentence. If you were to remove *Nathan*, the sentence would still be about Francesca’s husband. Because Francesca can only have one husband, it is not essential to know his name for the sentence to make sense.

- B) Reusable shopping bags, *relatively unknown two years ago*, have exploded in popularity since the “green” movement became fashionable.

In this sentence, *relatively unknown two years ago* is a nonrestrictive phrase. While it adds a detail about reusable shopping bags, if it were removed it would still be clear that reusable bags have become more popular with the rise of the “green” movement. The sentence would have the same meaning if the phrase were removed, so the phrase is nonrestrictive.

- C) The beach picnic was a success on that beautiful day, *which was the first sunny day of the summer*.

In this case, *which was the first sunny day of the summer* is a nonrestrictive clause because, while it adds detail about the beautiful day, it does not affect the meaning of the

sentence. The sentence would still have the same meaning—that the beach picnic was a success— without that clause.

Consider the following examples where the **restrictive** word, phrase or clause is in *italics*:

A) My cousin *Allison* just graduated from high school.

*Allison* is a restrictive word because it makes the sentence about that one particular cousin; it indicates that the author has several cousins and/or several cousins who just graduated from high school. If *Allison* were removed, the sentence would imply that the writer has only one cousin and that cousin just graduated from high school. Because removing the word *Allison* would change the meaning of the sentence, it is restrictive.

B) The dog *with the white spot on his nose* belongs to my neighbor.

Here, *with the white spot on his nose* is a restrictive phrase because it makes the sentence about that one particular dog. Without the phrase, the sentence would no longer be referring to that specific dog, so the meaning of the sentence would change; therefore, *with the white spot* is a restrictive phrase.

C) The man *who delivers the mail* is always very friendly.

In this case, *who delivers the mail* is a restrictive clause that specifies one particular man. If the clause were removed, the sentence would be too general and it would be unclear who, exactly, is very friendly. Because removing the clause would alter the meaning of the sentence, the clause is restrictive.

#### **Style Matters:**

Understanding sentence structure and grammar, along with careful word selection, will help you produce writing that is clear and concise. Can you identify sentences in your own writing with restrictive and nonrestrictive elements? Try to compose a few sentences using the rules for restrictive and nonrestrictive words, phrases and clauses.