

Restrictive and Nonrestrictive Clauses



Image Credit: Tom from Pixabay

Restrictive and nonrestrictive clauses – what a technical term to come across! Let's cut to the chase and pluck a couple of examples out of the air before getting down to explanations.

Cars which pollute the air should be banned. [Restrictive]

Cars, which pollute the air, should be banned. [Nonrestrictive]

Both these sentences start with 'cars' (a noun).

They are then followed by a relative clause beginning with 'which' (a relative pronoun).

Now the difference – subtle but important. You'll have noticed the commas in the second sentence. These change the meaning.

In the first sentence, there is a specific group of cars being referred to: those which pollute the air.

Cars which...

The implication is that there are other groups of cars that don't.

When you make this sort of grouping, you are *restricting* or *defining* what's being referred to. This is therefore a restrictive clause.

In the second sentence, the relative clause is offset by commas. As a result of that, *all* cars are being referred to: they all pollute the air.

Cars, which...

With this grouping, you are *not restricting* or limiting what's being referred to. It's a nonrestrictive clause, which adds more information about cars in general.

'Which' or 'that'?

These two relative pronouns may seem to be interchangeable but you can't use 'that' in nonrestrictive clauses:

| | | |
|---|---|---------------|
| <i>Cars that pollute the air should be banned.</i> | ✓ | [Restrictive] |
| <i>Cars which pollute the air should be banned.</i> | ✓ | [Restrictive] |

| | | |
|--|---|------------------|
| <i>Cars, that pollute the air, should be banned.</i> | ✗ | [Nonrestrictive] |
|--|---|------------------|

And additionally, in US English, 'which' is not used in restrictive clauses. So the second example above is very British! This side of the water we can use both 'which' and 'that'.

Other relative pronouns

'Which' and 'that' are not the only relative pronouns that introduce these clauses. We also have:

| | | | | |
|--------------|-------------|------------|-------------|--------------|
| <i>which</i> | <i>that</i> | <i>who</i> | <i>whom</i> | <i>whose</i> |
|--------------|-------------|------------|-------------|--------------|

Who

Here's a nonrestrictive clause using 'who'. It gives *additional* information about the man:

The man, who plays violin as an amateur, is very musical.

(oh, by the way, he plays the violin) as opposed to this example (restrictive), which gives specific *identifying* information:

The man who plays violin as an amateur is very musical.

Not the other man who plays professionally!

When you have a proper name before a relative clause, you can only follow it with a non-restrictive clause (the one with commas!):

| | | |
|---|---|------------------|
| <i>I spoke to John, who plays violin.</i> | ✓ | [Nonrestrictive] |
| <i>I spoke to John who plays violin.</i> | ✗ | [Restrictive] |

Whose

Have a look at the difference here:

I prefer a sommelier, whose judgment is usually spot-on.

I prefer a sommelier whose judgment is spot-on.

The first example (nonrestrictive) refers to all sommeliers (they all get it right), whereas the second (restrictive) is asking for a specific sommelier who has good judgment. Not just any old sommelier!

Proofreading techniques

The editor's problem with relative clauses is the comma. Until you get a bit more of a feel for these distinctions, it's sometimes worth using the 'Find' function in Word (control + F) to locate each occurrence of relative pronouns in the text you are editing. Then you can work through and weigh up whether or not they need that comma before (and after). If the relative clause can be removed without altering the subject's identity, then the commas are good!

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