

Restrictive vs. Non-restrictive Clauses

Unfamiliar and complex-sounding grammatical terms can often intimidate people. However once you get used to the vocabulary, talking about and understanding grammar becomes easier.

A **clause** is a group of words consisting of a noun and a verb which may or may not be a complete sentence. Often, a clause can be a whole sentence, as in those potentially terrifying words: “I do”. However an example of a clause that is not a sentence would be: “After I ran down the aisle”. A sentence is always a complete thought and this clause needs us to say what happens after she ran down the aisle in order to be a complete sentence.

This dual nature of clauses allows writers to do great and wonderful things with their writing. Clauses can be combined in various orders and with varying levels of complexity in order to say things just right. There are two important types of clauses: restrictive and non-restrictive.

Restrictive clauses

A **restrictive clause** is essential to the proper understanding of the sentence. This means that the clause limits the meaning of what is being said and is essential to its understanding.

Examples

The student *who missed class* was behind on her homework.

The popcorn *that Sebastian made* was stale.

In the first example, the essential idea is that the specific student who missed class is the one behind on her homework and not any of the other students. In the second example, it is Sebastian’s popcorn that is stale and not anyone else’s popcorn. If the restrictive clauses are removed, it becomes impossible to clarify what is being described.

Non-restrictive clauses

A **non-restrictive clause** is not essential to the proper understanding of the sentence. This clause can be removed from the sentence without eliminating information essential to understanding what is being said. Non-restrictive clauses are often separated with commas while restrictive clauses are not.

Examples

The student, *who is on the school hockey team*, has failed her last three tests.

The popcorn, *covered in butter*, is stale.

In these examples, the non-restrictive clause may be removed from the sentence without preventing the reader from understanding the essential information being expressed. As well, in each case, the non-restrictive clause is separated from the main sentence with commas. These commas let the reader know that the information is extra and not grammatically essential.

References

Fowler, H. R., Aaron, J. E., McArthur, M. (2005). *The Little, Brown handbook*, 4th Canadian edition, Pearson Education Canada Inc.