

## Grammar Lesson: Restrictive vs. Non-restrictive Elements

One of the trickiest topics in English grammar is the difference between restrictive and non-restrictive elements. However, mastering this topic will greatly improve your writing. This resource first explains the difference between the two; then, it explains how to properly use each one.

### What do restrictive and non-restrictive elements have in common?

Both restrictive and non-restrictive elements are units of text that come after a noun and serve to add additional information about or clarify that noun. All of the following are examples:

My sister, **who lives in Alaska**, is named Sarah.  
Computers **that run slowly** should be replaced.  
Forrest City, **where I was born**, is in Arkansas.  
The man **who gave a speech** is my father.

Notice that in all of these cases, the restrictive or non-restrictive element comes right after a noun and before the sentence's verb; also, these elements tend to begin with a **relative pronoun** like who, that, where, and which. Additionally, notice that you could take all of these elements out of the sentence and still have a grammatically correct sentence:

My sister is named Sarah.  
Computers should be replaced.  
Forrest City is in Arkansas.  
The man is my father.

However, you may also notice that in some cases, removing the element causes a lack of clarity. For example, the second example now seems to be suggesting that ALL computers should be replaced, not just the ones that run slowly. This is the difference between restrictive and non-restrictive elements.

### What are restrictive elements?

**Restrictive elements** are necessary for identifying the noun that comes before them. They cannot be removed from the sentence without causing a lack of clarity. Our example above, "Computers **that run slowly** should be replaced," features a restrictive element because taking it out of the sentence changes the whole meaning of the sentence. Here are some more examples:

The man **who gave a speech** is my father. → The man is my father. (which man?)  
The class **which meets on Tuesday** is my favorite. → The class is my favorite. (which class?)  
Dogs **that are loyal** make good pets. → Dogs make good pets. (do they all?)

In all of these examples, taking out the blue text obscures or changes the meaning of the entire sentence. We need those elements to distinguish this particular man, class, or type of dog from all other men, classes, and types of dogs. Notice that unlike non-restrictive elements, restrictive elements are NOT offset by commas.

### What are non-restrictive elements?

**Non-restrictive elements** are NOT necessary for identifying the noun that comes before them—they simply serve to add extra information about the noun. You can remove a non-restrictive element from the sentence without obscuring the identity of the noun or changing the meaning of the sentence. Our example above, "Forrest City, **where I was born**, is in Arkansas," features a non-restrictive element because taking it out of the sentence does NOT change or obscure what we mean by "Forrest City"—it is simply adding bonus information about Forrest City. Here are some more examples:

Barack Obama, **who was the 44<sup>th</sup> president**, gave a speech.  
Organic Chemistry, **which meets on Tuesday**, is my favorite class.  
Cottey College, **where I went to college**, is in Nevada, MO.

In all of these examples, taking out the blue text does not obscure or change the identity of the preceding noun: we know who Barack Obama is even without the blue text, we know what Organic Chemistry is even without the blue text, and we know what Cottey College is even without the blue text. We do not need the blue text to distinguish THIS person, place, or thing from others. Notice that non-restrictive elements ARE offset by commas.

You may also encounter a specific type of non-restrictive element called an appositive. **Appositives** serve the same purpose of providing extra but unnecessary information about a noun; however, they do not begin with a relative pronoun like who, where, or which. Examples:

Barack Obama, **the 44<sup>th</sup> president**, gave a speech.  
Organic Chemistry, **my favorite class**, meets on Tuesday.  
Cottey College, **a women's liberal arts and sciences college**, is in Nevada, MO.

How do I tell if I have a restrictive or non-restrictive element?

It is not always immediately obvious if an element is restrictive or non-restrictive. Recall this example from earlier:

My sister, **who lives in Alaska**, is named Sarah.

In this case, since we've offset the element with commas, it must be a non-restrictive element. However, what if I had more than one sister? Removing the element would give us:

My sister is named Sarah.

But if I've got more than one sister, I need to be able to distinguish THIS sister from my other sister(s). In that case, the element would be restrictive because I would need it in order to clarify which of my sisters I am talking about:

My sister **who lives in Alaska** is named Sarah.

Using the restrictive element signals to the reader that I have more than one sister, but I am currently talking about the one who lives in Alaska. Like we have done here, you will often have to rely on context to determine if an element should be treated as restrictive or non-restrictive.