

Nonrestrictive or Restrictive?

Consider these two sentences:

- A. Karl’s friend, Brian, is coming over. B. Karl’s friend Brian is coming over.

Sentence A means that Karl has just one friend, whose name is Brian, and that Brian is coming over. Sentence B means that one of Karl’s friends—Brian—is coming over. Why? Because in sentence A, “Brian” is a nonrestrictive element, while in sentence B, it’s a restrictive element. Read on . . .

Nonrestrictive Elements

A nonrestrictive element (also known as a nonessential element) is a word, phrase, or clause that IS NOT essential to the meaning of the sentence. It modifies, or describes, a word whose meaning would be clear without it.

Restrictive Elements

A restrictive element (also known as an essential element) is a word, phrase, or clause that IS essential to the meaning of the sentence. It *restricts* the sentence to a particular meaning. In other words, it tells the reader who or what you are talking about.

As a reader, there are a few ways you can tell whether an element is nonrestrictive or restrictive:

A nonrestrictive element IS set off by commas.

Which is used with nonrestrictive elements.

A restrictive element IS NOT set off by commas.

That is used with restrictive elements.

Who is used with both nonrestrictive AND restrictive elements. So if a clause begins with *who*, look to see if there is comma before it to know whether it’s nonrestrictive or restrictive.

Here are some examples:

The nonrestrictive elements are underlined:

- ⇒ Patsy’s, which is where we are going, opens at six.
- ⇒ Laura, who has red hair, is pretty.
- ⇒ The principal, Mr. Anders, called my parents.

The restrictive elements are underlined:

- ⇒ The restaurant that we are going to opens at six.
- ⇒ The girl with the red hair is pretty.
- ⇒ The man who called yesterday was Mr. Anders.

As a writer, whether you use a restrictive or nonrestrictive element depends on what you want to say. Consider the following:

- ⇒ Dan’s sister, who lives in Connecticut, is two years younger than him.

Here, the commas tell the reader that Dan has one sister, and she is two years younger than him. The clause “who lives in Connecticut” adds more information about the sister but does not identify her.

- ⇒ Dan’s sister who lives in Connecticut is two years younger than him.

Here, the absence of commas signals that Dan has more than one sister. The clause “who lives in Connecticut” lets the reader know which of Dan’s sisters this sentence is about.

- ⇒ The cupcakes, which had green sprinkles, were cute.

Here, the writer assumes the reader knows which cupcakes she is talking about when she says “the cupcakes.” “Which had green sprinkles” gives the reader additional—but not essential—information.

- ⇒ The cupcakes with the green sprinkles were cute.

Here, the writer is using “with the green sprinkles” to identify the cupcakes she is talking about. (Maybe there were also cupcakes with yellow frosting—but they weren’t as cute as the ones with the green sprinkles.)

Directions: For each sentence below, check one of the boxes to indicate whether the underlined element is nonrestrictive or restrictive. Then explain how you know.

1. The gymnastics meet is on Thursday, which is also my birthday.

nonrestrictive restrictive How I know: _____

2. This book is about a woman who escaped from slavery.

nonrestrictive restrictive How I know: _____

Directions: Fill in the circle next to the correct answer to each question below.

3. **Emily has one cat. Which of the following sentences is correct?**

- Ⓐ Emily's cat, Mr. Carson, is fascinated by the television.
- Ⓑ Emily's cat Mr. Carson is fascinated by the television.

6. **Laura invited a total of nine girls to her party. Which of the following sentences is correct?**

- Ⓐ Laura invited three girls, who are in her ballet class, to her party.
- Ⓑ Laura invited three girls who are in her ballet class to her party.

4. **Zoe has only one friend named Tatiana. Which of the following sentences is correct?**

- Ⓐ Zoe's friend Tatiana, who grew up in Costa Rica, hates the cold weather.
- Ⓑ Zoe's friend Tatiana who grew up in Costa Rica hates the cold weather.

7. **Sean has two brothers. Which of the following sentences is correct?**

- Ⓐ Sean's brother, Carlos, works at the coffee shop on Smith Street.
- Ⓑ Sean's brother Carlos works at the coffee shop on Smith Street.

5. **"Bryan's uncle Joe is a dentist." From that sentence, you can tell that**

- Ⓐ Bryan has only one uncle.
- Ⓑ Bryan has more than one uncle.

8. **"Bill's cousin Mia, who lives in Maine, is getting married." What is the restrictive clause in that sentence?**

- Ⓐ Mia
- Ⓑ who lives in Maine

Directions: Rewrite each sentence below, correcting the error or errors.

9. First we went to the bagel shop, then we went to the shop, that Trevor's parents own.

10. Erin has two friends, who are vegetarians, and one friend, who is a vegan.

11. The chairs, in the waiting room, are not very comfortable.
