

Relative Clauses

SUU Writing Center

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***This tipsheet assumes that you know the difference between independent clauses and dependent clauses. If you need more information on that difference, ask a tutor or see the tipsheet on that subject.**

Relative Clauses:

<p>A relative clause is a clause that follows a noun or a pronoun in order to describe it. Relative clauses often begin with a relative pronoun (<i>who, whom, whose, which, that</i>). Relative clauses can either be restrictive or nonrestrictive.</p>	<p>I like carrots <i>that have a green, leafy top</i>. [Clause describes the noun <i>carrots</i>.]</p> <p>I'll answer the person <i>who lets me speak</i>. [Clause describes the noun <i>person</i>.]</p>
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Restrictive and Nonrestrictive Clauses:¹

Restrictive Clauses:

<p>A restrictive clause is an adjective clause that is essential to the meaning of a sentence because it limits its noun or pronoun to one particular person, place, object, or kind of thing. Because restrictive clauses are essential, commas do not set them off.</p> <p>Strictly speaking, the word <i>which</i> shouldn't begin a restrictive clause.</p>	<p>All the students <i>who do their work</i> should pass easily.</p> <p>[<i>All students</i> will not necessarily pass; only <i>all students who do their work</i> will pass. Here, the clause does more than add a little information. Instead, it restricts the identity of the students who will pass to a particular kind of student. Notice that when the clause is NEEDED to answer "what kind?" or "which one?" sorts of questions, NO COMMAS are used.]</p>
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Nonrestrictive Clauses:

<p>A nonrestrictive clause is an adjective clause that adds extra or nonessential information to a sentence. Often, nonrestrictive clauses modify proper nouns (<i>university</i>=common noun; <i>SUU</i>=proper noun). Commas always set off nonrestrictive clauses.</p> <p>Note: Strictly speaking, the word <i>that</i> shouldn't begin a nonrestrictive clause.</p>	<p>Edgar Allen Poe, <i>who wrote "The Raven,"</i> is a great American poet.</p> <p>[The information contained in the clause isn't needed to answer the question "Which Edgar Allen Poe?" Thus, the clause is nonrestrictive and must be set off with commas.]</p>
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¹ Whether a clause is restrictive or nonrestrictive often depends on the intended meaning; the writer will have to decide what his/her intent is and punctuate accordingly.

