

Using Commas to set apart restrictive and non-restrictive wording

Don't let the jargon terms *restrictive* or *non-restrictive* throw you off. To punctuate these groups of words correctly, all you need to do is to identify the phrase or clause in question and then decide whether it is central to the meaning of your sentence. If it is, then it is restrictive, but more importantly the wording should not be set apart or sandwiched with commas. If you don't need the phrase or clause, if it is just additional modifying information, then it is non-restrictive. Such wording should be set apart with commas that signal its relative lack of significance.

Restrictive clauses

Examples

1. The early Irish *who lived by farming and herding* were the core of their society.
2. They praised neighbors and foes *who lived honorable lives*.
3. The notion of honor *that was so highly valued* determined the actions of men and women alike.

Non-Restrictive clauses

Examples

4. The cow, *with its many benefits*, was the centerpiece of the Irish economy.
5. The position of Ard Ri, *the high king*, had not yet been achieved.
6. The populace, *which appears to have been Celtic*, created and supported a vibrant culture.

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Sample Sentences

Punctuate appropriately the italicized wording.

1. The leftover spuds *that were on the cutting board* were rather mushy to the touch.

Tom Kinsella 1/29/11 3:38 PM

Comment [1]: The significance of the clause – it is integral to the sentence – indicates that this is restrictive and thus properly punctuated. Use of the emphatic “that” instead of “which” also points to this as a restrictive clause.

2. Christina *the cook* had asked her guests *who if anyone was allergic to mushy potatoes*.

Tom Kinsella 1/29/11 3:19 PM

Comment [2]: “The cook,” an appositive, is a necessary detail, thus restrictive. The italicized relative clause is direct object of the verb “had asked.” “Guests” is the indirect object. There should be no punctuation separating the objects. Some writers would set apart “if anyone,” but that’s pretty aggressive rhetorical punctuation. Recap: just use the final period.

3. There were two in the group *who admitted to such allergies*.

Tom Kinsella 1/29/11 3:20 PM

Comment [3]: Restrictive. Do not separate.

4. Those two *who wore peach-colored dresses* spoke about years of distrust for French fries.

Tom Kinsella 1/29/11 3:21 PM

Comment [4]: Without contextual evidence to the contrary, I would consider this clause non-restrictive.

5. Such off-beat food allergies *the bane of their sufferers* have seldom been recognized or understood.

Tom Kinsella 1/29/11 3:23 PM

Comment [5]: This appositive might be seen as non-restrictive or parenthetical. Either way it should be set apart.

6. Christina *who is conscientious to a fault* always asks about mushy potatoes.

Tom Kinsella 1/29/11 3:24 PM

Comment [6]: Restrictive.

The following sentences are incorrectly punctuated. In what way(s)?

7. The *big*, red, four-door Ford was filled with ducks *that needed to get to water*.

Tom Kinsella 1/29/11 3:26 PM

Comment [7]: Consecutive coordinate adjectives.

Tom Kinsella 1/29/11 3:27 PM

Comment [8]: I’m reading this final clause as restrictive.

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8. The riverboat driver{,} who always worked for pay, had found them in a pine tree.

Tom Kinsella 1/29/11 3:28 PM

Comment [9]: I'm reading this clause as non-restrictive. The point isn't about his pay but the ducks in the pine tree.

9. That forest with its strange history was the focus of the townspeople's attention.

Tom Kinsella 1/29/11 3:45 PM

Comment [10]: To emphasize or de-emphasize. That is the question. I'm reading this as restrictive, but you may not read it that way.

10. The two best-known inhabitants, the old man and the cat on the bike{,} had celebrated the arrival of the ducks for months.

Tom Kinsella 1/29/11 3:31 PM

Comment [11]: I presume that the two best-known inhabitants are, in fact, known, making this phrase non-restrictive.

Punctuate appropriately the italicized wording.

11. Samuel Johnson's prose-fiction masterpiece *Rasselas* had deeply disturbed Ken as a child.

Tom Kinsella 1/29/11 3:32 PM

Comment [12]: I'm considering *Rasselas* to be restrictive. Did you know that it was Sam's prose-fiction masterpiece?

12. He often proclaimed that anyone *who read it twice* was a foolish person with too much free time.

Tom Kinsella 1/29/11 3:34 PM

Comment [13]: This is clearly restrictive; try reading the sentence without the relative clause. The sentence is well pointed.

13. James Boswell{,} *who certainly had too much free time*{,} liked to read it twice a year.

Tom Kinsella 1/29/11 3:47 PM

Comment [14]: This clause could be read as restrictive, non-restrictive, or even parenthetical. I like the rhetorical drama introduced by the commas, so I punctuate it in this manner. It's your choice.