A **restrictive element** restricts the meaning of the word it modifies and is therefore essential to the meaning of the sentence. It is **not** set off by commas.

Example: *The children needed shoes that were sturdy.*

In this sentence we learn that the children needed a specific type of shoes; therefore the clause “that were sturdy” is essential to the sentence and does not have a comma. The word **that** is the key word used with restrictive clauses.

A **nonrestrictive element** describes a word whose meaning is already clear without the additional words. It is not essential to the meaning of the sentence and **is** set off with commas.

Example: *The children needed sturdy shoes, which were expensive.*

In this sentence we learn an extra fact—the shoes were expensive. That phrase merely adds more information, and it needs a comma because it is not vital to the meaning of the sentence. The word **which** is the key word used with unrestrictive clauses.

Elements that may be restrictive or nonrestrictive include:  
*adjective clauses, adjective phrases, and appositives.*

An **adjective clause** usually follows the noun or pronoun it describes and begins with a relative pronoun (who, whom, whose, which, that) or a relative adverb (when, where).

Restrictive Example: A Corporation **that has government contracts** must maintain careful personnel records.  
Non-Restrictive Example: The U. S. Coast Survey, **which was established in 1807**, was the first scientific agency in this country.

An **adjective phrase** is a prepositional or verbal phrase that functions as an adjective.

Restrictive Example: One corner of the attic was filled with newspapers **dating from the turn of the century**.  
Non-Restrictive Example: The helicopter, **with its 100,000-candlepower spotlight illuminating the area**, circled above.

**Appositives** are nouns or pronouns that rename a nearby noun.

Restrictive Example: Rick James’ song “Fire It Up” was blasted out of amplifiers ten feet tall.  
Non-Restrictive Example: Darwin’s most important book, *On the Origin of Species*, was the result of many years of research.