

# THE ACADEMIC SUCCESS CENTER

at **Sam Houston**  
STATE UNIVERSITY

## Restrictive and Nonrestrictive Elements

---

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.