

Relative clauses (defining and non-defining)

English Grammar · B2

Restrictive vs. Non-restrictive

Defining vs non-defining

Defining	Non-defining
essential · no commas	extra · commas
<i>The man who called ...</i>	<i>My boss, who is kind, ...</i>

Defining vs non-defining: reference card grid

Relative clauses are divided into two types, distinguished by whether the information is **essential**:

- **Restrictive** (defining): Provides **essential** information, identifying “which one,” with **no comma**.
- **Non-restrictive** (non-defining): Provides **extra** information; removing it does not affect identification, so it is **set off by commas**.

The man who called is my boss.

The man who called is my boss. (Restrictive: identifies which man)

My boss, who is very kind, called me.

My boss called me, and he is a very nice person. (Non-restrictive: supplementary information)

Note: A **comma** signals a non-restrictive clause, indicating the information is an aside.

Commas and Which

There are also differences in the choice of **relative pronouns** between the two types of clauses:

- **Restrictive:** Use *who* / *that* for people, *which* / *that* for things; may be omitted when functioning as an object.
- **Non-restrictive:** Use **who** for people, **which** for things; **that cannot be used**, and it **cannot be omitted**.

This book, which I read last year, is excellent.

*I read this book last year, which was excellent. (Non-restrictive, use *which*)

Note: **that is never used** in non-restrictive clauses: ~~My boss, that is kind, ...~~
× → My boss, **who** is kind, ... ✓.

Common Errors

- × ~~My mother who lives in Beijing is a teacher.~~ → ✓ My mother**, who** lives in Beijing**, ** is a teacher. — Unique people or things (mother, Beijing, sun) can only take non-restrictive clauses; omitting commas implies “you have several mothers”.
- × ~~He failed the exam, it made his parents angry.~~ → ✓ ...the exam**, which** made his parents angry. — A comma cannot directly join two sentences; a comma plus *which* refers to the entire preceding situation.
- × ~~My boss, I met yesterday, is kind.~~ → ✓ My boss, **who(m)** I met yesterday, is kind. — The relative pronoun in a non-restrictive clause **cannot be omitted**.
- Commas must appear **in pairs**: When a clause is inserted mid-sentence, it requires commas on both sides: *My boss, who is kind, called me.*