

Comma usage with Non-restrictive or Non-essential Elements

Nonessential or nonrestrictive elements are those elements that you can remove from the sentence and the meaning is not changed; they do not limit the meaning of the word they modify.

Restrictive Elements, on the other hand, limit the meaning of the sentence, so when you take the element out, the meaning of the sentence is changed.

Correct: A: Jane, who loves to read, found the library.

The nonrestrictive element or clause is who loves to read, and if we remove that clause, the meaning has not been changed: Jane found the library, so we offset the clause with commas.

Incorrect: B: Men, who rob banks, go to jail.

Correct: C: Men who rob banks go to jail.

Notice if you take who rob banks out of the sentence, the meaning is changed. Men go to jail makes no sense without the restrictive clause who rob banks. Because the clause “who rob banks” limits the meaning of the sentence, it should not be offset with commas. It is the men who rob banks that go to jail—not men go to jail.

Correct: People who drink and drive should go to jail. Notice that there are no commas offsetting *who drink and drive* because *who drink and drive* limits the meaning to only certain people should go to jail.

In order to determine whether an element is restrictive—limiting meaning—or whether an element is nonrestrictive—does not limit the meaning, remove the element and see if the meaning of the sentence is changed. If it is changed, you do not need commas.