A spiral-bound notebook with a brown cover and a white page. The spiral binding is on the left side. The text is centered on the page.

Using the nonrestrictive comma

See related columns:


Commas & skydiving

**Stupid comma with *that*
and *which***

When to use commas
with nonrestrictive
clauses

When not to use commas
with restrictive
clauses

**Nonrestrictive
clauses
are generally introduced
by which.**



**Restrictive
clauses
are generally introduced
by that.**

Both nonrestrictive
and restrictive clauses
may be introduced
by who.

A spiral-bound notebook with a brown cover and a white page. The spiral binding is on the left side. The text is centered on the page.

**Nonrestrictive clauses
are nonessential.**

**Nonrestrictive clauses
do take commas.**

A spiral-bound notebook with a brown cover and a white page. The spiral binding is on the left side. The page is mostly blank, with a horizontal line near the top. The text is centered on the page.

**Restrictive clauses
are essential.**

A spiral-bound notebook with a brown cover and a white page. The spiral binding is on the left side. The page is mostly blank, with a horizontal line near the top. The text is centered on the page.

**Restrictive clauses
do not take commas.**

Commas?

- 1. The man who is wearing a white hat is 102 years old.**

Commas?

- 1. The man who is wearing a white hat is 102 years old.**

[Which man?]

Commas?

1. The one who is wearing a white hat

Commas?

1. The man who is wearing a white hat is 102 years old.

Commas?

1. The man who is wearing a white hat is 102 years old.

Commas?

1. The man who is wearing a white hat is 102 years old.

No commas with restrictive
clauses

Commas?

- 2. The man who is wearing a black hat is 90 years old.**

Commas?

2. The man who is wearing a black hat is 90 years old.

[There's only one man.]

Commas?

- 2. The man who is wearing a black hat is 90 years old.**

Commas?

2. The man[,]
who is wearing a
black hat[,]
is 90 years old.

Commas?

2. The man[,]
who is wearing a black hat[,] is 90 years old.

Commas with nonrestrictive
clauses

Commas?

Two hints:

When to use commas

with nonrestrictive clauses

Commas?

First hint:

**Can the clause be placed in
parentheses?**

Commas?

2. The man (who is wearing a black hat) is 90 years old.

Commas?

Second hint:

**Can the phrase “by the way”
be inserted?**

Commas?

by the way

2. The man (who[^]is wearing a black hat) is 90 years old.

Commas?

2. The man[,]
who is wearing a
black hat[,]
is 90 years old.

Commas?

2. The man[,]
who is wearing a black hat[,] is 90 years old.

Commas with nonrestrictive
clauses



Commas?

Now for a test.

Commas?

3. In which of the following sentences does the thief get all of the money?

Commas?

A. The thief stole all the money that was in the house.

B. The thief stole all the money, which was in the house.

Commas?

A. The thief stole all the money that was in the house.

B. The thief stole the money, which was in the house.



Commas?

A. The thief stole all the money that was in the house.

B. The thief stole all the money, which was in the house.

Commas?

A. The thief stole all the money that was in the house.

B. The thief stole all the money, which was in the house.

Commas?

Why?

**B. The thief stole all the money,
which was in the house.**

Commas?

A. The thief stole all the money that was in the house.

In this sentence, the thief didn't get the money hidden in the garage, only the money that was in the house.

Commas?

In this sentence, the thief gets all the money, which happens to be in the house.

B. The thief stole all the money, which was in the house.

Commas?

4. Sally wrote the report which was accepted by the board.

John wrote the report which was rejected.

Commas?

4. Sally wrote the report which was accepted by the board.

John wrote the report which was rejected.

[two authors and two reports]

Commas?

4. Sally wrote the report which was accepted by the board.

John wrote the report which was rejected.

Commas?

4. Sally wrote the report [that] was accepted by the board.

John wrote the report [that] was rejected.

Commas?

4. Sally wrote the report **[that]** was accepted by the board.

No commas with restrictive
clauses

Commas?

5. The quality that impresses me most, is commitment.

Commas?

5. The quality that impresses me most, is commitment.

[Which quality?]

Commas?

5. The one that impresses me most

[Which quality?]

Commas?

5. The quality that impresses me most, is commitment.

Commas?

5. The quality that impresses me most[] is commitment.

Commas?

5. The quality that impresses me most[] is commitment.

No commas with restrictive
clauses

Commas?

5. The quality that impresses me most[,] is commitment.

I like to call the unnecessary comma above the “comma of desperation.”

Commas?

The “comma of desperation” is used by desperate writers who don't know the rule – so they drop in a comma where it feels right to have one.

Commas?

5. The quality that impresses me most[,] is commitment.

Commas?

5. The quality that impresses me most[] is commitment.

Commas?

5. The quality that impresses me most[] is commitment.

No commas with restrictive
clauses

Commmas?

6. The hat in the closet is mine.

The hat on the table is yours.

Commas?

6. The hat in the closet is mine.

The hat on the table is yours.

[There are two hats.]

Commmas?

6. The hat in the closet is mine.

The hat on the table is yours.

Commas?

6. The hat in the closet is mine.

The hat on the table is yours.

Commas?

6. The hat in the closet is mine.

The hat on the table is yours.

No commas with restrictive
clauses

Commas?

- 7. We will formulate an action plan which will serve as your guide for improving your writing over time.**

Commas?

7. We will formulate an action plan which will serve as your guide for improving your writing over time.

[There's only one plan.]

Commas?

- 7. We will formulate an action plan which will serve as your guide for improving your writing over time.**

Commas?

7. We will formulate an action plan[,] which will serve as your guide for improving your writing over time.

Commas?

7. We will formulate an action plan [,] which will serve as your guide for improving your writing over time.

Commas with nonrestrictive clauses

Commas?

**8. The dance we attended, was
at the Wabasha Caves.**

Commas?

**8. The dance we attended, was
at the Wabasha Caves.**

**[There is more than one dance
in question.]**

Commas?

**8. The dance we attended, was
at the Wabasha Caves.**

Commas?

8. The dance we attended was at the Wabasha Caves.

Commas?

8. The dance we attended was at the Wabasha Caves.

No commas with restrictive clauses



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**Stupid comma with *that*
and *which***