

Recognise restrictive and non-restrictive clauses

Even though I enjoy learning about language and grammar, my brain grinds to a halt after too much exposure to linguistic terminology.

However, there are times when understanding the nuts and bolts of sentence structure helps you to avoid ambiguity in your writing. That's why I recommend understanding the difference between a restrictive and a non-restrictive relative clause.

Imagine you're writing a post for your blog. You've got something you want to get off your chest, so you write:

Grammar nerds, **who pick holes in your writing**, are really irritating.

The implication here is that **all** grammar nerds pick holes in your writing and are therefore **all** really irritating. **The relative clause (in bold) is non-restrictive**: it isn't specifying any particular sort of grammar nerd but is giving us some additional information about them. Because the information isn't absolutely essential to the meaning of the sentence, it's marked off with commas.

But before you publish your post, you hesitate. After all, not *all* grammar nerds pick holes in your writing. And it's only the ones who do who are irritating. You decide to amend your sentence. Fortunately, you don't have to rewrite the whole thing; you can just remove the commas:

Grammar nerds **who pick holes in your writing** are really irritating.

This relative clause (in bold) is restrictive: it's specifying that the **only** grammar nerds you're talking about are the ones who pick holes in your writing. This information is now essential to your meaning, so there are no commas separating it from the rest of the sentence.

A restrictive clause gives information that is essential to the meaning of the sentence. It specifies. A non-restrictive clause is marked off by commas and gives information that could be removed without harming the intended sense. It tells us something extra.