

Defining relative clauses

According to Thomson and Martinet (1986), this type of relative clause describes “the preceding noun in such a way as to distinguish it from the other nouns of the same class”. They are “essential to the clear understanding of the noun”. In technical contexts, they are commonly used in definitions:

e.g. A pressure cooker is an airtight container which cooks food in much less than the usual time.

e.g. A laboratory is a place which is equipped for the performance of tests and experiments.

**Defining essential –
no commas**

Non-defining clauses

These are used after nouns to give more information about them. There are not essential to the clear understanding of the noun, but add **descriptive detail** or **explanation**:

e.g. Laser light, which has a high frequency can carry many more information channels than microwaves.

e.g. The flame must be heated to a certain temperature, which varies according to the substance used.

**Defining not essential –
commas needed**

Connective relative clauses

These do not add further detail to the noun; neither do they define it. They are usually placed at the end to make a **comment** on the idea presented in the sentence, or, as Thomson and Martine put it, to “continue the story”. (p. 88).

e.g. Lithium batteries are extremely light, which explains their suitability for use in small devices.

**Defining not essential –
commas needed**



The pronoun **‘that’** in a relative clause is never used with a comma to separate it from the noun. It is **always** a **defining relative clause**.