

THE ESSENTIAL CLAUSE

Recognize an essential clause when you find one.

An **adjective clause** can be either essential or **nonessential**. To make the distinction, you must analyze the function of the clause in that particular sentence. When an adjective clause is *essential*, it is clarifying a general, ambiguous **noun** in such a way that readers understand *which one of many* the writer means.

Read these examples:

The man **who ordered another double anchovy pizza** claims to have a pet dolphin in his backyard pool.

Which man among the billions of human males on the planet? The one **who ordered another double anchovy pizza!**

Freddie hopes to return to the city **where he met a woman with haunting green eyes.**

Which of the many cities on the planet? The one **where Freddie met a woman with haunting green eyes!**

The student **who needs an A on the final exam** is copying statistics formulae on her bare ankle.

Which of the many students in the class? The one **who needs an A on the final exam!**

Note that the exact same clauses above—in sentences with minor alterations—can become **nonessential**.

Read these versions:

Mr. Hall, **who ordered another double anchovy pizza**, claims to have a pet dolphin in his backyard pool.

Freddie hopes to return to Cairo, **where he met a woman with haunting green eyes.**

Veronica, **who needs an A on the final exam**, is copying statistics formulae on her bare ankle.

In place of ambiguous **nouns** like *man*, *city*, and *student*, we now have *Mr. Hall*, *Cairo*, and *Veronica*, specific **proper nouns**. The information in the adjective clauses might be interesting, but that information is not necessary, for we already know *which* man, *which* city, and *which* student.

A proper noun usually signals that the adjective clause is nonessential. Sometimes, though, you will find such a well-defined **common noun** that the adjective clause is a mere accessory.

Read this example:

As we sped through the neighborhood, we spotted crows eating French fries tossed on the road. They did not fly to a tree as we expected. The birds, **which never showed fear of the vehicle**, watched as we swerved around them.

Birds is a common noun, but the adjective clause is nonessential because we know the exact birds that the writer means.

Punctuate essential clauses correctly.

Since an essential clause provides necessary description for a vague **noun**, use no punctuation to separate it from the rest of the sentence.

The car **that Madeline purchased from a neighbor** belches black smoke whenever she accelerates.

We took Grandma to a restaurant **where servers bring everyone a slice of birthday cake**.

The waiter **who served the salad** did not notice the caterpillar nibbling a lettuce leaf.

Which car? *Which* restaurant? *Which* waiter? We *need* that information in the adjective clause.

When the clause becomes decorative rather than defining—or *nonessential*—you will then need to separate it with commas:

The ancient Buick, **which Madeline purchased from a neighbor,** belches black smoke whenever she accelerates.

We took Grandma to Hullabaloo's Excellent Eats, **where servers bring everyone a slice of birthday cake.**

Javier, **who served the salad,** did not notice the caterpillar nibbling a lettuce leaf.

