**Lesson 3.5 – Restrictive and Non-Restrictive Relative Clauses**

Relative clauses are clauses (so they contain a subject and a predicate) that describe, or modify, a noun. They fall into two classes, restrictive and nonrestrictive. The restrictive ones limit, or "restrict" what the noun refers to.

The realtor [who is selling our house] is really funny.
The place [where we love to go on vacation] is usually Orcas Island.
The child [who is juggling] wants to be in the circus.

So the bracketed clauses here pick out which *realtor, place*, and *child*.

Nonrestrictive relative clauses, on the other hand – though they might provide similar information – do not restrict the reference of the noun in the same way as restrictive relative clauses. In writing, nonrestrictive relative clauses are set off by commas, and you can also usually detect "comma intonation" in a speaker's voice, distinguishing the two types.

restrictive: The PlayStation which we bought recently from a friend wasn't too expensive.

nonrestrictive: The PlayStation, which we bought recently from a friend, wasn't too expensive.

The restrictive relative clause, *which* (or *that* - I'll come back to that) *we bought recently from a friend*, limits which PlayStation we're referring to, to the one we bought recently from a friend. The non-restrictive relative clause, on the other hand, does not restrict the reference of the noun *PlayStation*; it isn't information that distinguishes this *PlayStation* from other ones. That we bought the PS from a friend is simply extra, incidental information.

This difference between restrictive and nonrestrictive is really revealed when you have a noun that there is only one of - a proper noun. In that case, restricting that already singular set is weird, but using a non-restrictive clause is fine.

Hailey, who I saw on the bus yesterday, has a new graphing calculator.
??Hailey who I saw on the bus yesterday has a new graphing calculator.

This second sentence could only work if there is more than one Hailey and this is picking out the intended Hailey - the "on the bus Hailey" not the "next door neighbor Hailey" or something.

**Activity**. Identify the relative clauses in the following sentences and then determine whether they are restrictive or non-restrictive by putting commas around the non-restrictive ones. Many of them could be both, but the meaning would be slightly different. If that's the case, briefly explain the difference.

The kid from your class who has that cool dog is walking towards us.
The store only allows returns that have the tags on and a receipt.
The sunglasses which I bought last month already broke.
Some gum is in my bag which is on the table.
The girl who is going to buy our old bikes is coming over tomorrow.
Sue who is going to buy our old bikes is coming over tomorrow.

There is a prescriptive rule of writing that suggests that *which* should be used with non-restrictive relative clauses and *that* with restrictive relative clauses. This rule, however, varies, by style guides and editors, and is also a fairly recent restriction. Both *which* and *that* are and have been common for centuries with restrictive relative clauses. Most speakers and writers would agree that it sounds odd, however, to use *that* in a non-restrictive relative clause; you probably wouldn't write (or say)

> Sushi, that I love, is on sale at the market.

MS Word seems to be reinforcing this rule, though. When its grammar checker finds *which* not preceded by a comma, it suggests the change to *that*. It's not incorrect, however, to have *which* in restrictive relative clauses. British English conventions care even less about this. Oxford Dictionaries writes, "In British English, restrictive relative clauses can be introduced by *that* or *which* when they are referring to things rather than people."

> The coat that/which Dan had on yesterday was new.

It's a question which you can think about and analyze for yourself. Sometimes I just think *which* sounds better (but Word has given me a green squiggle line for that last one!).