

Distinction 1: *that* is *essential*, while *which* is *non-essential*: Figure 14 below depicts the difference between Essential and Non-essential clauses.

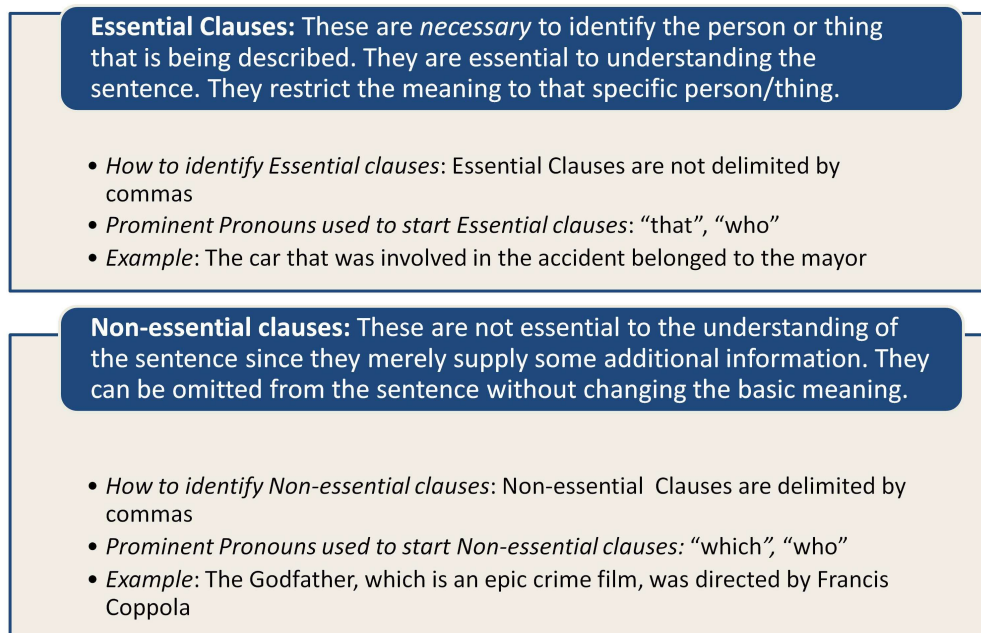


Figure 14: "Essentials" Vs "Non-Essentials"

As depicted in Figure 14 above, *essential* clauses:

- i. Help identify the person/thing that the sentence refers to. In the example:

The car that was involved in the accident belonged to the mayor.

The clause *that was involved in the accident* is helping us *identify* the mayor’s car. In other words, this is *essential* to the meaning of the sentence and the whole sentence would be meaningless, if this clause were removed.

- ii. Are *not* delimited by commas: As evident in the above example (*The car that was involved in the accident belonged to the mayor*), the essential clause *that was involved in the accident* is not delimited by commas.

On the other hand, *non-essential* clauses:

- i. Are *not* essential to the meaning of the sentence and merely provide some *additional* information. In the example:

“The Godfather”, which is an epic crime film, was directed by Francis Coppola.

The clause *which is an epic crime film* is merely providing some *additional* information about the film “*The Godfather*”. Even without this clause, the sentence would make complete sense:

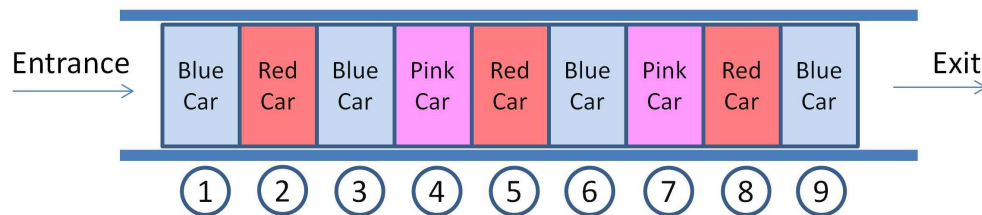
“The Godfather” was directed by Francis Coppola.

- ii. Are delimited by *commas*: As evident in the above example (“*The Godfather*”, *which is an epic crime film, was directed by Francis Coppola*), the non-essential clause *which is an epic crime film* is delimited by commas.

Note:

- i. Since *that* is essential, relative clauses starting with *that* are *never* delimited by commas; on the other hand, since *which* is non-essential, relative clauses starting with *which* are *always* delimited by commas
- ii. Some pronouns such as *who* can be used both as *essential* and *non-essential*. Presence or absence of comma (before *who*) would determine whether *who* is used as *essential* or as *non-essential*.

Let’s take an example, which will make clear, the distinction between *essential clauses* and *non-essential clauses*. The following picture illustrates a *parking area* which currently has 9 cars parked (each car uniquely identified from 1 through 9).



If the statement uses *non-essential* clause:
The third car, which is blue, belongs to James.

The implication is:
Car # 3 belongs to James.

Reason: *which is blue* is *non-essential* clause. So, the *core* of the above sentence is:
The third car belongs to James. An additional piece of information that we are provided about this car is that this car is blue in color.

However, if the statement uses *essential* clause:
The third car that is blue belongs to James.

The implication is:
Car # 6 belongs to James.

Reason: *that is blue* is *essential* clause. So, this clause helps us *identify* the car that belongs to James. Car #1 is the *first* car that is blue; car #3 is the *second* car that is blue; car #6 is the *third* car that is blue!