

RELATIVE PRONOUNS

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Intermediate Grammar
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RELATIVE PRONOUN is one which is used to refer to nouns mentioned previously, whether they are people, places, things, animals, or ideas. Relative pronouns can be used to join two sentences. A relative pronoun is a word that introduces a dependent (or relative) clause and connects it to an independent clause. A clause beginning with a relative pronoun is poised to answer questions such as Which one? How many? or What kind? Who, whom, what, which, and that are all relative pronouns.

Relative clauses are also sometimes referred to as adjective clauses, because they identify or give us additional information about the subject of the independent clause they relate to. Like adjectives, these clauses in some way describe that subject. Relative pronouns, like conjunctions, are words that join clauses—in this case, a relative clause to its main clause. The type of relative pronoun used depends on what kind of noun is being described.

The most common relative pronouns are:

- Who: Refers to a person (as the verb's subject)
- Whom: Refers to a person (as the verb's object)
- Which: Refers to an animal or thing
- What: Refers to a nonliving thing
- That: Refers to a person, animal, or thing

Look at these examples of using relative pronouns:

- The woman **who** came to the door left flowers for you.
- I am not sure **whom** this book belongs to.
- Interpretative dance, **which** I find a bit disconcerting, is all the rage.
- Is this **what** you were talking about?
- She finally visited the coffee shop **that** had such great reviews.
- The driver who ran the stop sign was careless.
- The children, whom we love dearly, need better educations.
- Never go to a doctor whose office plants have died. (Erma Bombeck).
- I have a friend whose cat is annoying.
- The book, which is now out of print, has all the information you need.
- This is the book that everyone is talking about.

In each example above, the subject of the sentence is described by a relative clause (italicized). As these clauses describe a noun or a pronoun, they are also known as adjective clauses, because they act like adjectives in the sentence. Each clause is introduced by a relative pronoun (in bold). Relative pronouns connect the description to the rest of the sentence in an orderly way.

Occasionally, the relative adverbs "when" and "where" are also used as relative pronouns. For example:

- Grandma remembers a time **when** radio shows were popular.
- I want to go to a resort **where** the food is free.

In these cases, "when" and "where" introduce clauses that describe a noun the refers to a time or place, making them work as relative pronouns in these sentences.

A. RULES FOR USING RELATIVE PRONOUN

There are only a few relative pronouns in the English language. The most common are which, that, whose, whoever, whomever, who, and whom. In some situations, the words what, when, and where can also function as relative pronouns. Because there are only a few of them, there are also just a few rules for using relative pronouns. Keep them in mind as you write.

1. Relative clauses are typically introduced by relative pronouns, and that the relative pronoun can function as a possessive pronoun, an object, or a subject.
2. When relative pronouns introduce restrictive relative clauses, no comma is used to separate the restrictive clause from the main clause.
3. In American English, the relative pronoun whom is used rarely. You may notice this in conversations, but it is best to use the term when writing to ensure that your work is grammatically correct.

B. DEFINING VS NON-DEFINING RELATIVE CLAUSES

When relative pronouns are used to add descriptive information, that information is either defining or non-defining. A defining clause - also known as a restrictive clause - gives essential information about the noun in question. It is so important that it cannot be cut out of the sentence and still convey the intended meaning. For example:

- This is the dog **that** was hit by a car.
- I don't like people **who** interrupt me.

In both cases, the italicized clauses contain critical information. You can tell because if you cut out the clause, the sentence's meaning is fundamentally different. For example, saying "I don't like people" is very different from saying "I don't like people who interrupt me."

Note that defining clauses require no additional punctuation.

On the other hand, non-defining clauses add information that's nice to have but isn't essential to the sentence's overall meaning. They could be deleted and the sentence would convey basically the same information. For example:

- This painting, which I adore, is worth over a million dollars.
- The teacher, who was about to retire, began writing her memoirs.

In both cases, you could cut out the non-defining clause and still understand the point of the sentence. The important part is that the painting is worth a million dollars; the fact that it is adored is merely nice to know.

Note that non-defining clauses are set apart from the main sentence by commas, which help to indicate its less important status in the sentence.

C. A NOTE ABOUT *WHO*, *THAT*, AND *WHICH*

One of the most common mistakes in writing is to use the wrong relative pronoun, particularly when it comes to mixing up "who" and "that." "Who" is always used to set up a relative clause that describes a person, while "that" is used to describe an object or another non-human being. For example:

- I like the girl **who** runs fast.
- I like the dog **that** does tricks.
- I like the clock **that** chimes the hour.

Another common error is to mix up that and which. When describing objects and non-human beings, "that" is used to introduce a defining relative clause, while "which" is used to introduce a non-defining clause. For example:

- The cat, **which** is very old, took a nap.
- The cat **that** is very old needs to see the vet today.

The relative pronoun "which" is used for non-essential information set off by commas; "that" is used for essential information and requires no additional punctuation.

When it comes to people, however, you don't have to worry about confusing "which" or "that." You always use "who:"

- The woman, **who** is very old, took a nap.
- The woman **who** is very old needs to see the doctor today.

1. That VS Which

Two relative pronouns whose functions are easily confused are that and which. The rule of thumb is this: that introduces a restrictive clause, and which introduces a non-restrictive clause.

A restrictive clause is an essential part of its sentence; if it were taken out of the sentence, the sentence's meaning would change. Nonrestrictive clauses are just the opposite.

Example: The wardrobe **that** has the fur coats in it leads to Narnia.

If we were to excise the clause "that has the fur coats in it" from the sentence, the meaning of the sentence would change. We would no longer know which wardrobe leads to a magical land with talking animals, which was the intention of the sentence. This kind of clause gets a **that**. The word **which**, on the other hand, should introduce a nonessential clause that can be removed from a sentence without changing the sentence's meaning.

Example: The wardrobe **which** has the fur coats in it leads to Narnia.

Here, "which contains several fur coats" is a parenthetical remark that can be removed without materially altering the sentence. Nonrestrictive (or nonessential) clauses are set off with commas, as shown in the example above.

2. Who VS That

Not every style guide agrees on whether **that** is an acceptable relative pronoun to use when referring to people. To some, the following sentence may sound incorrect.

Example: The teacher **that** gives out candy is always the students' favorite.

The truth is, this sentence is perfectly fine. Yet you may want to consider that your readers could disagree. Go with the safer bet, **who**.

Example: The teacher **who** gives out candy is always the students' favorite.

D. POSSESSIVE RELATIVE PRONOUNS

It surprises some people to learn that both *who* and *which* can take the possessive form *whose*. Some will argue that *of which* is a better construction when talking about things rather than people, but this results in unnecessary awkwardness. The truth is that *whose* has been widely and correctly applied to nonhumans for hundreds of years.

Look at these examples:

- She apologized to the boy **whose** glasses got broken.
- The house **whose** owner is on vacation has an unsightly garden.
- The house, the owner of **which** is on vacation, has an unsightly garden. (This is correct but cumbersome.)

E. COMPOUND RELATIVE PRONOUNS

The term compound relative pronoun sounds complex, but it really isn't. Simply put, compound relative pronouns apply universally to a number of people or things. They include *whoever*, *whomever*, *whichever*, and *whatever*.

Look at these examples:

- Please tell **whoever** may call that I am not available.
- **Whomever** you hire will be fine with me.
- **Whichever** train you take from here, you will end at Charing Cross station.
- Carly will be successful at **whatever** she chooses to do in life.

F. KEEP PRONOUNS AND ANTECEDENTS CLOSE

An antecedent is the noun that a pronoun refers to. To ensure clarity, place an antecedent immediately before the relative pronoun referring to it.

Incorrect: The park at the end of our street, which is pristine, is a favorite place of mine.

An unnecessary ambiguity is created in this sentence. What is pristine, the park or the street? Reordering the sentence can help, but rewriting it would be even better.

Correct: The pristine park at the end of our street is a favorite place of mine.

G. CONCLUSION

We use who and whom for people, and which for things, or we can use that for people or things.

We use relative pronouns:

- after a noun, to make it clear which person or thing we are talking about:

the house that Jack built

the woman who discovered radium

an eight-year-old boy who attempted to rob a sweet shop

- to tell us more about a person or thing:

My mother, who was born overseas, has always been a great traveller.

Lord Thompson, who is 76, has just retired.

We had fish and chips, which is my favourite meal.

But we do not use that as a subject in this kind of relative clause.

We use whose as the possessive form of who:

This is George, whose brother went to school with me.

We sometimes use whom as the object of a verb or preposition:

This is George, whom you met at our house last year.

This is George's brother, with whom I went to school.

But nowadays we normally use who:

This is George, who you met at our house last year.

This is George's brother, who I went to school with.

When whom or which have a preposition the preposition can come at the beginning of the clause:

I had an uncle in Germany, from whom I inherited a bit of money.

We bought a chainsaw, with which we cut up all the wood.

or at the end of the clause:

I had an uncle in Germany whom I inherited a bit of money from.

We bought a chainsaw, which we cut all the wood up with.

We can use that at the beginning of the clause:

I had an uncle in Germany that I inherited a bit of money from.

We bought a chainsaw that we cut all the wood up with.

Knowing how relative pronouns work in a sentence will help you add important descriptive information in the form of relative clauses. Once you understand how they work, you'll be able to decide whether your information is defining or non-defining and choose the appropriate relative pronouns and punctuation to lead your readers to a deeper understanding of your meaning.

And that's the relative pronoun in a nutshell. Relatively painless, wasn't it?