

Writing and Tutorial Center

Relative Clauses Made Simple

Relative clauses, also known as adjective clauses, connect ideas using pronouns that refer to something previously mentioned. It is important to learn which relative pronouns (who, whom, which, whose, that) are grammatically correct to use in each case as well as how the presence or absence of commas can change the meaning of a sentence containing a relative clause.

FUNCTION OF RELATIVE CLAUSES

Relative clauses provide additional information about a previously mentioned noun, the ‘antecedent.’ They allow you to combine two independent clauses to create one sentence:

The article had caused controversy. It was widely read.
 [The article] [that had caused the controversy] was widely read.
 [antecedent] [relative clause]

TYPES OF RELATIVE CLAUSES

The two types of relative clauses are ‘restrictive’ and ‘nonrestrictive,’ with restrictive clauses more frequently used by writers. Restrictive clauses, also known as ‘identifying’ clauses, give information that is necessary to identify the antecedent:

The rocket *that had not been tested* exploded upon take-off.
 The relative clause restricts the meaning to a specific rocket, thus identifying it.

Do not use commas around the relative clause if it is restrictive:
Incorrect: The rocket, *that had not been tested*, exploded on take-off.

Nonrestrictive clauses, also known as ‘nonidentifying’ clauses, give extra, non-essential information about the antecedent:
 The engineer, *who is the architect's wife*, collaborated on the project.

RESTRICTIVE RELATIVE CLAUSES

The table below shows which relative pronouns to use when the antecedent is human or nonhuman as well as the grammatical function of the relative pronoun.

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Grammatical Function in Clause	Human Antecedent	Nonhuman Antecedant
Subject	Who, That [Informal]	Which, That
Object	Whom [Formal], Who, That, No Relative Pronoun	Which, That, No Relative Pronoun
Possessive	Whose	Whose, Of Which [Formal]

Use *who* if the antecedent is human and the relative pronoun is the subject of the relative clause:
 The man *who lives down the hall from me* is a professional wrestler.

Do not use a personal pronoun to repeat the subject of the independent clause after a relative clause:
 The man *who lives down the hall from me* he is a professional wrestler.

Use *that* or *which* if an antecedent is nonhuman and the relative pronoun is the subject of the relative clause:

The project *that started last year* is still not complete.

The project *which started last year* is still not complete.

Use *whom* [formal], *who*, or *that* if the antecedent is human and the relative pronoun is the object of the relative clause:

Formal: The migrant workers *whom the police deported* can appeal the decision in the courts.

The migrant workers *who/that the police deported* can appeal the decision in the courts.

Do not include an object pronoun that refers to the antecedent:

The migrant workers *who/that the police deported them* can appeal the decision in the courts.

Use *that* or *which* if the antecedent is nonhuman and the relative pronoun is the object of the relative clause:

The records *that/which the accountant requested* have arrived.

In spoken English and informal writing, it is common practice to leave out the object relative pronoun for both human and nonhuman antecedents (only for restrictive relative clauses):

The migrant workers *whom the police deported* can appeal the decision in the courts.

The records *that/which the accountant requested* have arrived.

Use *whose* for human and nonhuman antecedents when the relative pronoun functions as a possessive pronoun:

The plastic surgeon *whose license was revoked* left the country.

The chair *whose leg was damaged* was sold at a discount.

It is possible to use *where* or *when* as a relative pronoun if the antecedent is a place or a time:

The store *where I bought my bag* is closed today.

That was the moment *when everything changed*.

Do not use *what* as a relative pronoun:

Everything *what* that he believes originates from superstition.

NONRESTRICTIVE RELATIVE CLAUSES

The antecedent of a nonrestrictive clause is often a proper noun or a common noun which refers to a unique person, event or thing. The commas act as parentheses; readers can still fully understand who or what the antecedent is:

The Burj Khalifa, *which is located in Dubai*, is the tallest building in the world.

My mother, *who was born in Pennsylvania*, now lives in Florida.

CHART

Grammatical Function in Clause	Human Antecedent	Nonhuman Antecedent
Subject	Who	Which
Object	Whom, Who	Which
Possessive	Whose	Whose, Of Which [Formal]

Do not use the relative pronoun *that* in a nonrestrictive relative clause:

My cousin just quit his new job, *that which he started* only two months ago.

Do not leave out the object relative pronoun in a nonrestrictive relative clause:

Incorrect: her new bike, *she bought less than a week ago*, was stolen.

Correct: Her new bike, *which she bought less than a week ago*, was stolen.

Note: Nonrestrictive relative clauses always require a relative pronoun.