Relative clauses

Relative clauses (also known as adjective clauses) are a type of subordinate (or dependent) clause used to describe a noun in a main clause. We use them to specify which particular noun we are referring to or to provide additional information about the noun. They are usually introduced using a relative pronoun (*that*, *which*, *who*, *whom*, *whose*) and are placed directly after the noun they describe or add information to. We can categorise relative clauses in two ways:

- Defining or non-defining relative clauses
- Subject or object relative clauses

Learning the difference between these types of relative clause is important to be able to use them correctly.

Relative pronouns

In English, there are five relative pronouns – *that*, *which*, *who*, *whom* and *whose* – that we use to introduce relative clauses. The relative pronoun replaces the noun being described in the main clause. The table below explains when to use each relative pronoun:

Relative Pronoun	Uses	Example Sentences
that	Used for types of people and objects/animals Used in defining clauses	*The woman* ***that*** *lives next door to me called. (that = the woman)* *Kate loves the present* ***that*** *you bought her. (that = the present)*
which	Used for objects/animals Usually used in non-defining clauses	*We went to Paris,* ***which*** *is my favourite city. (which = Paris)* *This book,* ***which*** *I found yesterday, is very old. (which = the book)*
who	Used for people Replaces subject nouns	*I know someone* ***who*** *can help you. (who = someone)* *Craig,* ***who*** *lives next door, got a new job. (who = Craig)*
whom	Used for people Replaces object nouns	*Fiona,* ***whom*** *we went to school with, is pregnant. (whom = Fiona)* *Dan,* ***whom*** *you spoke to yesterday, said hi. (whom = Dan)*
whose	Shows possession Followed by a noun (the possession)	*He's the writer* ***whose*** *books I love.(whose = the writer's)* *The cat,* ***whose*** *fur is silky, is sleeping. (whose = the cat's)*

© yourENGLISHPAL.com

Defining and non-defining relative clauses

When the relative clause is necessary to identify which specific noun is being referred to, we call this a **defining relative clause** (also known as an essential or restrictive relative clause).

When the relative clause is not necessary to identify which specific noun is being referred to, we call this a **non-defining relative clause** (also known as a nonessential or non-restrictive relative clause).

Defining (essential/restrictive) relative clause examples

Consider the following sentence which contains an unspecified noun:

- *The bus has been cancelled.*

In this sentence, it is not obvious which specific bus has been cancelled, so we need to add a defining relative clause so the other person knows which bus we're talking about:

- *The bus **that goes to Manchester** has been cancelled.*

Here is another example:

- *I already broke the phone.*

In the sentence above, it is not clear which specific phone has been broken, so we need to use a defining relative clause so the other person knows which phone we are talking about:

- *I already broke the phone **that I bought last week**.*

You can see in the examples above that we **do not use commas** to separate a defining relative clause from the main clause.

Non-defining (nonessential/non-restrictive) relative clause examples

Consider the following sentences, which both contain information about Leonardo da Vinci:

- *Leonardo Da Vinci painted the Mona Lisa. Leonardo Da Vinci was an Italian artist.*

The noun "Leonardo da Vinci" is already defined, so we don't need a defining relative clause here. However, we can use a non-defining relative clause to present the two pieces of information in a more concise way to avoid repetition:

- *Leonardo Da Vinci**, who was an Italian artist,** painted the Mona Lisa.*

Here is another example. These two sentences both contain information about Paris:

- *We visited Paris. We had never visited Paris before.*

Again, "Paris" is already defined, but we can use a non-defining relative clause to make these pieces of information more concise and avoid repetition:

- *We visited Paris**, which we had never visited before**.*

You can see in the examples above that we separate a non-defining relative clause from the main clause **using commas**.

© yourENGLISHPAL.com

Subject and object relative clauses

If the relative pronoun acts as the subject of the verb in the relative clause, this is called a **subject relative clause**.

If the relative pronoun acts as the object of the verb in the relative clause, this is called an **object relative clause** (although the relative pronoun still appears at the beginning of the clause).

For example, in the following sentence, you can see that the relative pronoun *"that"* is the subject of the verb *"goes"*:

- *The bus **that goes** to Manchester has been cancelled.*
- *(The bus goes to Manchester.)*

In the following sentence, *"you"* is the subject of the verb *"met"*, and therefore, the relative pronoun *"whom"* is the object of that verb:

- *My brother, **whom** you **met** last week, has got a new job.*
- *(You met my brother last week.)*

Who vs whom

In formal English, we use *who* as the subject and *whom* as the object (either of a verb or preposition). However, despite what grammar puritans might tell you, in everyday modern English, most native speakers will just use *who* as both the subject and object of a verb (although it is still common to use *whom* as the object of a preposition when it appears directly after the preposition).

Common mistakes with relative clauses

Remember that the relative pronoun acts as the subject or object of the verb in the relative clause, and it is therefore a mistake to add an additional subject or object. This is a common mistake students make when they don't realise there is already a subject or object. For example:

- *The bus that ~~**it**~~ goes to Manchester has been cancelled. ('that' = the subject, so there is no need for 'it')*
- *My brother, whom you met ~~**him**~~ last week, has got a new job. ('whom' = the object, so there is no need for 'him')*

When you can omit the relative pronoun

If the relative clause is a defining object relative clause, you can omit the relative pronoun. For example:

- *The book **(that)** I borrowed from the library is due next week.*
- *The recipe **(that)** you sent me turned out to be delicious.*
- *The person **(whom)** I met at the conference gave an insightful presentation.*
- *The movie **(that)** we watched last night was thrilling.*
- *The guitar **(that)** my friend plays belongs to his grandfather.*
- *The teacher **(whom)** the students admired was awarded for her dedication.*

Grammar rules for relative clauses

- Place the relative clause directly after the noun it describes or adds information to.
- Use commas to separate a non-defining relative clause.
- Do not separate defining relative clauses with commas.
- You cannot use *that* in a non-defining relative clause.
- *Which* is not usually used in defining clauses (although this is not a strict rule, especially in spoken English).
- In a defining object relative clause, the relative pronoun can be dropped:
    - *I already broke the phone (that) I bought last week.*
    - *He loves the chocolates (that) you bought.*
- In a non-defining object relative clause, or in subject relative clauses, the relative pronoun cannot be dropped.
- Avoid double subjects in subject relative clauses.
- Avoid double objects in object relative clauses.

© yourENGLISHPAL.com

Relative Clauses

Relative clauses act as adjectives to add information to a **noun** in a **main clause**.

The **relative clause** is placed directly after the **noun** it modifies.

Relative clauses begin with a **relative pronoun** – *that / which / who / whom / whose.*

The **relative pronoun** replaces the **noun** being modified in the **main clause**.

The **relative pronoun** can either be the **subject** or **object** of the verb in the **relative clause**.

Relative clauses that are necessary to identify a specific noun are called **defining relative clauses**.

Relative clauses that are not necessary to identify a noun are called **non-defining relative clauses**.

Use **commas** to separate a **non-defining relative clause**.

Only use ***that*** in a **defining relative clause**.

SUBJECT RELATIVE CLAUSES

The relative pronoun is the subject of the verb

main clause | **noun to modify** | relative clause | **subject** | **object**

EXAMPLE 1: defining

The bus has been cancelled. **The bus** goes to Manchester.

The bus | **that** goes to Manchester | has been cancelled.

Don't add an extra subject:

The bus | **that** ~~**it**~~ goes to Manchester | has been cancelled.

EXAMPLE 2: non-defining

We visited **Riga**. **Riga** is the capital of Latvia.

We visited **Riga**, | **which** is the capital of Latvia.

Don't add an extra subject:

We visited **Riga**, | **which** ~~**it**~~ is the capital of Latvia.

OBJECT RELATIVE CLAUSES

The relative pronoun is the object of the verb

EXAMPLE 1: defining

My brother bought **the car**. **Daniel** recommended **the car**.

My brother bought **the car** | **that Daniel** recommended.

Don't add an extra object:

My brother bought **the car** | **that Daniel** recommended ~~**it**~~.

EXAMPLE 2: non-defining

My brother has got a new job. **You** met **my brother** last week.

My brother, | **whom you** met last week, | has got a new job.

Don't add an extra object:

My brother, | **whom you** met ~~**him**~~ last week, | has got a new job.

© yourENGLISHPAL.com