

Relative clauses

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There are three types of relative clauses in the English language - defining, non-defining and connective.

1. Defining relative clauses

They specify a noun or pronoun in the main clause and are necessary if we want to understand the meaning of a sentence.

I saw the girl who was outside our house. They wanted the picture that cost two pounds.

These relative clauses specify the objects of the main clauses. If we omit them, it is not clear what girl or picture we are talking about. The defining relative clauses follow after the relative pronouns *who*, *which*, *that*, *whose* and *whom*. We do not write them with commas.

Use of the relative pronouns

Who for persons

The man who called you has just arrived.

Which for things

This is the book which I wanted.

That for persons and things

Are you the boy that lives next door?

Can you see the tree that has no leaves?

The relative pronoun *that* is less formal than *who* or *which*.

Whose is a possessive pronoun for persons and things

It is a story about a boy whose parents got divorced.

The river whose bridge is in front of us is called the Cam.

Whom is the object of a verb

The man whom I met yesterday ...

Whom is very formal. In spoken English *who* or *that* are much more common.

The man who I met ... The man that I met ...

We can also leave out the pronoun. It is the most usual form.

The man I met ...

If the subject in the main clause is different from the subject in the defining relative clause, we normally leave out the relative pronoun.

The student you saw in Oxford is my neighbour. (the subjects are *the student* and *you*)

The bike she borrowed belongs to me. (the subjects are *the bike* and *she*)

Be careful

If the subject in the main clause and the relative clause is the same, we cannot omit the pronoun, because it becomes the subject of the relative clause.

The driver who took you to school is from York. The pen that is on the desk is new.

There is only one subject in each sentence - *the driver* and *the pen*.

If we leave out the subject, it will not be clear what we mean.

The driver took you to school is from York. (This sentence does not make any sense.)

Relative pronouns with prepositions

We use the relative pronouns with prepositions as follows.

The man I got it from

The man who/that I got it from

The man from whom I got it

The last sentence is not very common in spoken English as it is quite formal.

2. Non-defining relative clauses

They only describe a preceding noun or pronoun (add some information about them), but do not specify them. The **non-defining relative clauses** must be written with commas.

My father, who is 65 now, still works.

His car, which cost nearly 20,000 pounds, is broken.

If we leave out these relative clauses (*My father still works. His car is broken.*), the sentences remain grammatically correct and we know what father or car we are talking about. The only effect is that there is less information in the sentences.

More examples

I gave it to Peter, who is my close friend.

Ann, whom I admire, is not right in this case.

Their garden, which is near here, looks beautiful.

Pam, whose children go to school, is not so busy.

The non-defining relative clauses are quite formal and are typical of written English. In spoken English we prefer less formal structures.

Written English: *My father, who is 65 now, still works.*

Spoken English: *My father is 65 now and still works.*

Written English: *Their garden, which is near here, looks beautiful.*

Spoken English: *Their garden is near here. It looks beautiful.*

In informal English we use *who* instead of *whom*.

Formal: *Sam, whom I know quite well, would be a good husband.*

Informal: *Sam, who I know quite well, would be a good husband.*

3. Connective relative clauses

Connective clauses do not define or describe the preceding nouns or pronouns, but only develop the story.

I gave the letter to James, who sent it to London.

She passed me the salt, which fell on the floor.

The function of the **connective clauses** is different, but the rules are the same as with the non-defining clauses. We make them with the pronouns *who*, *whom*, *whose*, *which* and write them with commas.

Remember

We cannot write the **defining relative clauses** with commas, because they change the meaning of a sentence. Compare the following sentences.

The passengers who fastened their seatbelts survived. (Which passengers survived? Only the passengers wearing the seatbelts.)

The passengers, who fastened their seatbelts, survived. (Because all the passengers were wearing their seatbelts, they survived.)

In spoken English we make pauses in sentences instead of commas.