

Relative Pronouns and Relative Clauses

English has several relative pronouns: Who, whom, that, which, and whose. Many people struggle with the correct use of relative pronouns, particularly when to use that vs which and who vs whom. This handout will provide an overview of what relative clauses are and how to correctly use relative pronouns within different types of relative clauses. Each section will provide a grammatical overview and one or more examples.

Relative clauses

A relative clause is a type of dependant clause.

A dependant clause is a clause that does not form a "complete thought" and could not stand alone as a sentence.

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become part of a complete sentence. Since relative clauses serve a function similar to that of adjectives (description words), by providing more information about the subject of the independent clause they attach to, they are also known as adjective clauses.

There are two types of relative clauses: restrictive clauses and non-restrictive clauses.

Restrictive clauses

A restrictive clause is a type of relative clause that provides information about the subject of the independent clause that is necessary to the meaning of the sentence. This means that, without the restrictive clause, the meaning of the sentence would change. Restrictive clauses are not set apart from the independent clause within commas.

Example:

Diamonds that sparkle are expensive.

In the example above, the restrictive clause (that sparkle) restricts what type of diamonds are expensive. This sentence specifies that only "sparkly diamonds" are expensive.

Non-restrictive clause

A non-restrictive clause is a type of relative clause that adds non-essential information to a sentence. This means that the central meaning of the sentence would not change if the non-restrictive clause were omitted. Commas set the non-restrictive clause apart from the rest of the sentence.

Example:

Diamonds, which sparkle, are expensive.

In the example above, the non-restrictive clause (which sparkle) adds additional information about diamonds (that they sparkle) but does not affect the essential meaning of the sentence: diamonds are expensive.

Relative pronouns

Relative pronouns (Who, whom, that, which, and whose) indicate the beginning of a relative clause. When referring to something non-human, the appropriate relative pronouns are that or which. When referring to a human, the appropriate relative pronouns are typically who or whom. However, that can also be used to refer to humans in restrictive clauses. The possessive relative pronoun is whose when referring to either humans or non-humans.

Note: The relative pronoun must always be used to introduce a relative clause, except when the relative pronoun is the object of a restrictive clause. In these cases, the relative pronoun can be either included or omitted from the relative clause.

Example:

The spaghetti that I ate for dinner was overcooked.

Vs.

The spaghetti I ate for dinner was overcooked.

Both of the example sentences above contain the same relative clause. The only difference is that in the second sentence, the relative pronoun (that) is omitted.

The next sections will cover guidelines for understanding how to correctly use different relative pronouns within relative clauses.

That vs. which:

That

The relative pronoun that is used to signal a restrictive clause. That can be used to refer to humans or non-humans within a relative clause.

Example:

Adam took his car that had a bad transmission to the mechanic.

