

Relative clauses

Meaning and use

Relative clauses are used to give additional information about a noun, such as a person, place or thing. **Relative pronouns** introduce a relative clause. They include **who** for people, **that** and **which** for things, **when** for time, and **whose** to show possession.

Relative clauses belong to one of two categories: **defining** relative clauses and **non-defining** relative clauses.

1. **Defining** relative clauses add **essential** information to a sentence.

*The woman **who found my wallet** handed it in to reception.*

*The student **whose dog has run away** has gone to look for it.*

*I remember the day **when we first met**.*

*These are the earrings **that my mother gave me**.*

These clauses give **essential** information about the subject of the sentence. They define the **person, time or thing** that we are talking about. If we remove the clause, the sentence does not make sense.

2. **Non-defining** relative clauses add **extra** information to a noun or noun phrase.

*My friend's birthday, **which was last weekend**, was great fun.*

*My current girlfriend, **who I love very much**, calls me every night.*

This extra information is **not essential**. If we remove the clause, the sentence still makes sense. This type of clause is more common in written English.

Form

Defining relative clauses are made with **noun + relative pronoun + rest of clause**.

*A kangaroo is **an animal which lives in Australia**.*

***The man who came for lunch** was my uncle.*

*Winter is **a time when it sometimes snows**.*

Non-defining relative clauses are made in the same way. An important difference, however, between both types of clause, is the use of **punctuation**. With **non-defining** relative clauses, we separate the clause with **commas**. We cannot use **that** in this type of clause.

*My favourite food, **which used to be Italian**, is now Japanese.*

Rachel, **who we met yesterday**, lives in this neighbourhood.

My car, **which I bought seven years ago**, needs replacing.

This shirt, **which I bought last weekend**, cost £50.

My best friend, **who I met at university**, is coming for dinner.

Take note: replacing the relative pronoun

In **informal** communication, relative pronouns, such as **who** and **when**, are commonly replaced with **that** in defining relative clauses.

The woman **that** called last night was very polite.

Do you remember the time **that** you first met?

Take note: leaving out the relative pronoun

When using defining relative clauses in **informal** speech and writing, the relative pronoun can be **left out completely** if it refers to the **object** of the relative clause.

This is the shirt **that** I bought.

This is the shirt I bought.

The girl **who** I like isn't here yet.

The girl I like isn't here yet.

In **non-defining** relative clauses, the relative pronoun **cannot be left out**.

Take note: spoken English

The relative pronoun **who** is used when referring to people. However, in **formal** written and spoken English, if the pronoun refers to the **object** of the clause, we use **whom** instead.

My German teacher, **whom** I really admired, retired last year.

The woman **whom** I called this morning was my secretary.