



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.

A relative clause is clause that attaches to an independent clause (that is, a clause that **does** form a complete thought and **could** stand alone as a sentence) in order to add extra information to it. In this way, the relative clause is dependant upon the clause it attaches to 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.

In the example above, the sentence implies that Adam has more than one car. The restrictive clause ("that has a bad transmission") cannot be removed from the sentence because it specifies the car Adam is taking to the mechanic.

Which

The relative pronoun **which** is used to signal a non-restrictive clause.

Example:

Adam took his car, **which had a bad transmission**, to the mechanic.

In the example above, the non-restrictive clause ("which had a bad transmission) describes Adam's (only) car. Knowing that his car has a bad transmission is not necessary to know that he took it to the mechanic.

Who vs. whom

Who

Who typically replaces **that** and **which** when referring to a human. Commas indicates non-restrictive clauses and their absence indicates restrictive clauses.

Examples:

Sentence 1: Peter, **who lives in Toronto**, works in the banking industry.

Sentence 2: Doug and Carol are my closest friends **who live in the Calgary area**.

In sentence 1, **who** signals a **non-restrictive clause** because it is set off with commas. We do not need to know that Peter lives in Toronto to understand that he works in the banking industry.

In sentence 2, **who** signals a **restrictive clause** because there is no comma. This sentence implies that I have closer friends than Doug and Carol, but of all my friends in the Calgary area, Doug and Carol are my closest.

Whom

Whom is the objective case of **who**. This means that **whom describes an object not a subject**. For instance, in the sentence, “I love you”, “I” is the subject because it performs the action of “loving” and “you” is the object because it receives the action of being loved.

Example:

Jane saw the man **whom she met yesterday**.

In the example sentence above, Jane is the **subject**, because she performs the action of seeing, while the man is the **object** because he is being seen. Therefore, **whom** is used to describe the man because he is the object.

An easy way to tell whether you should use **who** or **whom** to describe a noun is to identify whether the noun you are describing performs an action or has the action performed on it. For example, “Peter who lives” simplifies to “Peter lives”, while “Peter whom we spoke of” simplifies to “we spoke of Peter.”

Additional resources

M. Fogarty. (2008, March 21). Which versus that. Quick and Dirty Tips. Retrieved from
<http://www.quickanddirtytips.com/education/grammar/which-versus-that-0?page=all>

T. Krupa. (2012, January 19). That versus which. APA Style Blog. Retrieved from
<http://blog.apastyle.org/apastyle/2012/01/that-versus-which.html>