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Relative clauses

What is a relative clause?

We can use relative clauses to join two English sentences, or to give more information about something.

I bought a new car. It is very fast.

→ **I bought a new car that is very fast.**

She lives in New York. She likes living in New York.

→ **She lives in New York, which she likes.**

Defining and Non-defining

A **defining relative clause** tells which noun we are talking about:

- I like the woman who lives next door.
(If I don't say 'who lives next door', then we don't know which woman I mean)

A **non-defining relative clause** gives us extra information about something. We don't need this information to understand the sentence.

- I live in London, which has some fantastic parks.
(Everybody knows where London is, 'which has some fantastic parks' is extra information)

Defining relative clauses:

1: The relative pronoun is the subject:

First, let's consider when the relative pronoun is the subject of a defining relative clause.

We can use 'who', 'which' or 'that'. We use 'who' for people and 'which' for things. We can use 'that' for people or things.

The relative clause can come after the subject or the object of the sentence. We can't drop the relative pronoun.

For example (clause after the object of the sentence):

- I'm looking for a secretary who / that can use a computer well.
- She has a son who / that is a doctor.
- We bought a house which / that is 200 years old.
- I sent a letter which / that arrived three weeks later.

More examples (clause after the subject of the sentence):

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- The people who / that live on the island are very friendly.
- The man who / that phoned is my brother.
- The camera which / that costs £100 is over there.
- The house which / that belongs to Julie is in London.

Try an exercise where the relative pronoun is the subject here

2: The relative pronoun is the object:

Next, let's talk about when the relative pronoun is the object of the clause. In this case we can drop the relative pronoun if we want to. Again, the clause can come after the subject or the object of the sentence. Here are some examples:

(clause after the object)

- She loves the chocolate (which / that) I bought.
- We went to the village (which / that) Lucy recommended.
- John met a woman (who / that) I had been to school with.
- The police arrested a man (who / that) Jill worked with.

(clause after the subject)

- The bike (which / that) I loved was stolen.
- The university (which / that) she likes is famous.
- The woman (who / that) my brother loves is from Mexico.
- The doctor (who / that) my grandmother liked lives in New York.
- **Try an exercise where the relative pronoun is the object here**
- **Try an exercise about defining relative clauses, both subject and object here**
- **Try another exercise about defining relative clauses here**

Non-defining relative clauses:

We don't use 'that' in non-defining relative clauses, so we need to use 'which' if the pronoun refers to a thing, and 'who' if it refers to a person. We can't drop the relative pronoun in this kind of clause, even if the relative pronoun is the subject of the clause.

(clause comes after the subject)

- My boss, who is very nice, lives in Manchester.
- My sister, who I live with, knows a lot about cars.
- My bicycle, which I've had for more than ten years, is falling apart.
- My mother's house, which I grew up in, is very small.

(clause comes after the object)

- Yesterday I called our friend Julie, who lives in New York.
- The photographer called to the Queen, who looked annoyed.
- Last week I bought a new computer, which I don't like now
- I really love the new Chinese restaurant, which we went to last night.

Prepositions and relative clauses

If the verb in the relative clause needs a preposition, we put it at the end of the clause:

For example:

- **listen to**

The music is good. Julie listens to the music.

→ The music (which / that) Julie listens **to** is good.

- **work with**

My brother met a woman. I used to work with the woman.

→ My brother met a woman (who / that) I used to work **with**.

- **go to**

The country is very hot. He went to the country.

→ The country (which / that) he went **to** is very hot.

- **come from**

I visited the city. John comes from the city.

→ I visited the city (that / which) John comes **from**.

- **apply for**

The job is well paid. She applied for the job.

→ The job (which / that) she applied **for** is well paid.

Whose

'Whose' is always the subject of the relative clause and can't be left out. It replaces a possessive. It can be used for people and things.

The dog is over there. The dog's / its owner lives next door.

→ The dog **whose** owner lives next door is over there.

The little girl is sad. The little girl's / her doll was lost.

→ The little girl **whose** doll was lost is sad.

The woman is coming tonight. Her car is a BMW.

→ The woman **whose** car is a BMW is coming tonight.

The house belongs to me. Its roof is very old.

→ The house **whose** roof is old belongs to me.

Where / when / why

We can sometimes use these question words instead of relative pronouns and prepositions.

I live in a city. I study in the city.

→ I live in the city **where** I study.

→ I live in the city **that / which** I study **in**.

→ I live in the city **in which** I study.

The bar in Barcelona is still there. I met my wife in that bar.

→ The bar in Barcelona **where** I met my wife is still there.

- The bar in Barcelona **that / which** I met my wife **in** is still there.
- The bar in Barcelona **in which** I met my wife is still there.

The summer was long and hot. I graduated from university in the summer.

- The summer **when** I graduated from university was long and hot.
- The summer **that / which** I graduated from university **in** was long and hot.
- The summer **in which** I graduated was long and hot.

