



That, Which, & Who: Relative Pronouns and Relative Clauses

To build more sophisticated sentences, we often combine clauses with relative pronouns.

clause = subject + verb

In other words, every sentence has at least one clause!

Subject = person, place, or thing	Verb = word that shows the time of its action
<p>"They" is a pronoun. Las Vegas has grown. Bedbugs suck.</p>	<p>"They" is a pronoun. Las Vegas has grown. Bedbugs suck.</p>

A **relative clause** cannot make sense on its own. It has to relate or connect to an *independent clause* in the same sentence.

Example:

He is the boy who ate a bug.

In this sentence, *He is the boy* is an *independent clause* because it has enough information that it could stand on its own as a sentence, but the *who ate a bug* part is a **relative clause** that gets its meaning from the independent clause it relates to. A relative clause is one of the many kinds of subordinate (or "dependent") clauses.

Pronoun = a noun-like function word that gets its meaning from a noun mentioned before it.

Jake said **he** would text you later.

I need the pen **that** is in front of you.

A **relative pronoun** is a pronoun that does the job of relating or linking a relative clause to an independent clause. **That, which, who, whom,** and **whose** are relative pronouns for linking adjective (relative) clauses to nouns.

Unlike the usual order of a simple adjective word before a noun, an **adjective clause** allows us to give more complex descriptions *after* the noun.

An adjective clause can be **essential**:

I need the pen **that is in front of you**.

She is the girl **who was at the party last week**.

Essential adjective clauses are necessary to define the pen and the girl in the sentences.

An adjective clause can also be **non-essential**:

The pen, **which appears in my hand**, is red.

The girl, **whom we expected to be late**, arrived at the party early, instead.

The use of “which” and the placement of commas around the relative clause can indicate the clause is considered optional description of the noun.

That

The relative pronoun **that** is best used for essential descriptions of things.

I need the pen that is in front of you.

That refers back to the thing-noun `pen`, which is in the **object position** after `need`. **An object cannot also be a subject at the same time in a sentence**, so to make `pen` also the subject of `is`, we need `that` to fill the subject position of the relative clause.

The word `that` is also used several other ways, but as a relative pronoun it shows that the following description limits and defines the noun it refers back to. In the example sentence, there is only one pen: the one in front of you.

Notice, also, that the example sentence has no commas in it. This is because we have to have the pen that is in front of you all together to describe and restrict the meaning of the `pen`. No part of the sentence is optional. It is all essential.

Which

Which is also for relating clauses, but works best for nonessential clauses, ones that we don't have to have to limit the meaning of the noun or to understand the independent clause.

The character's description, which appeared in the final chapter, was vague and too late in the story.

Notice that the which-clause here is between the subject and verb of the independent clause. Use commas to clearly signal and separate nonessential clauses.

Who

Who is a relative pronoun that refers back to a person or people.

They are the women who were at the party last week.

In this example, the person-noun *the women* is the subject of *were at the party last week*, which is essential description, so the relative pronoun is in **the subject form—*who***—and no commas were used.

My cousin, who usually never travels anywhere, is spending his honeymoon in Italy.

This *who*-clause is non-essential (in this context, the description is not necessary to distinguish *my cousin* from any other cousin), so it is marked with commas.

Whom

Two clauses about a person-noun as a **grammatical object** can be related with ***whom***.

Here is the woman about whom I spoke.

The original statement ideas were *Here is a (particular) woman.* and *I spoke about the woman.* Since the woman completes the action *is* and also works as the object of the preposition *about*, the relative pronoun is in the **object form—*whom***.

To figure out when to use *who* or *whom*, try this test:

If you would say “I . . .,” “she or he . . .,” or “they . . .,” then use “*who*.”

He sent the text. Now you know who sent the text.

If you would say “. . . me,” “. . . her or him,” or “. . . them,” then use “*whom*.”

She sent the text to me. Now you know to whom she sent the text.

Whose

To identify or describe something (usually a person) by its possessions, qualities, or characteristics and to combine clauses, use ***whose***.

She is the girl whose heel broke at the party.

Is this the singer whose album you said was released last Friday?

That is the fat tabby cat whose *YouTube* videos are watched by millions.

General Guidelines

There are contexts and sentences where it may not be necessary to strictly follow these rules, but just as a guiding principle, use *who*, *whom*, and *whose* to describe and relate clauses to people-nouns, use *that* and *whose* to refer to thing-nouns, and use *which* or *who* with commas for non-essential relative clauses.