

Relative Clauses

A **relative clause** describes a noun and can start with the **relative pronoun** *who*, *which*, *whose*, or *that*. A **defining relative clause** defines, or specifies, the noun that it describes. A **non-defining relative clause** does not change what the noun or sentence refers to. It only adds more information about the noun.

Defining relative clauses:

Use *who* for people, otherwise use *that* (American English) or *that/which* (British English).

In the two examples below, the underlined parts of each sentence are the defining relative clauses. They change the meaning of the sentences. You can check this by leaving out the relative clause and seeing if the sentence still has the same meaning.

Can I have the pencil that I gave you yesterday?
(*Can I have the pencil? – Unclear which pencil*)

Crick and Watson were the scientists who discovered the double helix structure of DNA.
(*Crick and Watson were the scientists. – Unclear which scientists*)

Non-defining relative clauses:

Use *who* for people, otherwise use *which*.

In the two examples below, the underlined parts still describe the noun before them, but they do not change the meaning of the noun or sentence. They can be thought of as parenthetical information.

I live in Amsterdam, which has great bicycle infrastructure.
(*I live in Amsterdam.*)

Myanmar, which was formerly known as Burma, is a Southeast Asian country.
(*Myanmar is a Southeast Asian country.*)

The difference between defining and non-defining relative clauses:

The two examples below show the difference in meaning between a defining and a non-defining relative clause.

The concept is to directly tax the residents who benefit from public investments.

Meaning: *Only the residents benefiting* from public investments should be taxed.

Vs.

The concept is to directly tax the residents, who benefit from public investments.

Meaning: *All the residents (= everyone)* should be taxed. All the people are benefiting from public investments.

Reduced relative clauses:

A **reduced relative clause** is a relative clause with some of the words left out. There are three kinds of reduced relative clauses. We use them to package information more tightly than otherwise possible, making them useful for long sentences.

You can leave out the relative pronoun and the verb *to be* when:

- There is a **passive verb** in the relative clause.

Don't forget to fill in the form attached to the email. (...that is attached to the email.)

- There is an **ing-verb** in the relative clause.

The man sitting on the couch over there is Simon's brother. (...who is sitting over there...)

- There is an **adjective** in the relative clause.

The solutions available to us are not perfect. (...that are available to us...)

In addition, you can leave out the relative pronoun when it is the object of the relative clause verb:

Where is the money I gave you last week? (...that I gave you last week?)

Relative clauses and prepositions:

Sometimes the verb in the relative clause needs a preposition. It can either be placed after the verb, or at the end of the clause/sentence. Typically, it is considered less formal to put the preposition at the end, but there are exceptions!

This is the house (that) I was born in. (Less formal)

This is the house in which I was born. (More formal)

The formal choice can also sometimes sound clumsy, especially if the context is casual.

Clumsy: *This is the house about which I told you.*

Good: *This is the house (that) I told you about.*

The formal choice is mostly found in several fixed expressions:

There are no physical means by which an unknown pure quantum state can be reproduced.

Collaboration is now central to the way in which public policy is created.

The extent to which this is true is up for debate.

When using **that**, the preposition must come at the end:

Incorrect: *They must be convinced of the commitment on that they are taking.*

Correct: *They must be convinced of the commitment (that) they are taking on.*