

3.14 Relative clauses

Defining relative clauses

As the name suggests, these clauses give essential information to define or identify the person or thing we are talking about. Obviously, this is only necessary if there is more than one person or thing involved. Example:

Elephants who marry mice are very unusual.

In this sentence we understand that there are many elephants, but it is clear that we are only talking the ones who marry mice.

Punctuation

Commas are not used in defining relative clauses.

Relative pronouns

The following relative pronouns are used in defining relative clauses:

	Person	Thing	Place	Time	Reason
Subject	who/that	which/that			
Object	who/whom/that/ø	which/that/ø	where	when	why
Possessive	whose	whose			

Notes:

1. The relative pronoun stands in place of a noun.

This noun usually appears earlier in the sentence:

The woman	who/that	Spoke at the meeting	Was very knowledgeable.
Noun , subject of main clause	Relative pronoun referring to 'the woman', subject of 'spoke'	Verb + rest of relative clause	verb + rest of main clause

2. *Who*, *whom* and *which* can be replaced by *that*. This is very common in spoken English.

3. The relative pronoun can be omitted (\emptyset) when it is the *object* of the clause:

*The mouse **that the elephant loved** was very beautiful.*

OR

*The mouse **the elephant loved** was very beautiful.*

Both of these sentences are correct, though the second one is more common in spoken English.

The mouse	that/\emptyset	the elephant loved	was very beautiful.
Noun , subject of main clause	Relative pronoun , referring to 'the mouse, object of 'loved'	verb + rest of relative clause	verb + rest of main clause.

(You can usually decide whether a relative pronoun is an object because it is normally followed by another subject + verb.)

4. *Whose* is used for things as well as for people.

Examples:

*The man **whose car was stolen**.*

*A tree **whose leaves have fallen**.*

5. *Whom* is very formal and is only used in written English. You can use *who/that*, or omit the pronoun completely

*The doctor **whom/who/that/ \emptyset I was hoping to see** wasn't on duty.*

6. *That* normally follows words *like something, anything, everything, nothing, all*, and superlatives.

Examples:

*There's something **that you should know**.*

*It was the best film **that I've ever seen**.*

Further Examples

*A clown is someone **who makes you laugh.***

*An elephant is an animal **that lives in hot countries.***

*The plums **that were in the fridge** were delicious. I have eaten them.*

*Where are the plums **(that) I put in the fridge?***

*Has anyone seen **the book I was reading?***

*Nothing **that anyone does** can replace my lost bag.*

*Let's go to a country **where the sun always shines.***

*They live in the house **whose roof is full of holes.***

(adapted from: www.edufind.com/english/grammar/rel2.cfm)