Relative clauses: Defining ("restrictive") and non-defining

Defining vs. Non-Defining

Defining vs Non-Defining Clauses: Difference in Meaning

There is a difference in meaning between defining and non-defining clauses that depends on the presence or absence of the comma. For example:

They have two sons who are doctors.

Defining clause; meaning that there are more sons in the family, e.g.:

They have two sons who are doctors and one who is an architect.

Compare:

They have two sons, who are doctors.

Non-defining clause; meaning that there are no more sons in the family.

ESL Tips on the Use of Relative Pronouns

Although there is no one single rule to cover all the cases, the following summary may be helpful if you need to make a quick decision:

1. Use *that* if the main clause poses the question WHAT? answered by the relative clause;
2. Do not use *that* for presenting non-essential, additional information (that is, in non-defining relative clauses); use *who* or *which* instead;
3. Use *who* to refer to people;
4. Use *which* to refer to things or to refer to the previous clause as a whole;
5. If you choose between *who* or *that*, use *who* in writing;
6. If you choose between *which* and *that*, use *which* in writing;
7. Do not put a comma before *that*.

Introduction and General Usage in Defining Clauses

Relative pronouns are *that*, *who*, *whom*, *whose*, *which*, *where*, *when*, and *why*. They are used to join clauses to make a complex sentence. Relative pronouns are used at the beginning of the subordinate clause which gives some specific information about the main clause.

This is the house that Jack built.
I don't know the day when Jane marries him.
The professor, whom I respect, was tenured.

In English, the choice of the relative pronoun depends on the type of clause it is used in.

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31 Handout adapted from owl.english.purdue.edu.
There are two types of clauses distinguished: defining (restrictive) relative clauses and non-defining (non-restrictive) relative clauses. In both types of clauses the relative pronoun can function as a subject, an object, or a possessive.

**Relative pronouns in defining clauses**

Defining relative clauses (also known as restrictive relative clauses) provide some essential information that explains the main clause. The information is crucial for understanding the sentence correctly and cannot be omitted. Defining clauses are opened by a relative pronoun and ARE NOT separated by a comma from the main clause. The table below sums up the use of relative pronouns in defining clauses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Function in sentence</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>People</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject</td>
<td>who, that</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Object</td>
<td>that, who, whom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possessive</td>
<td>whose</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Examples**

**Relative pronoun used as a subject:**

This is the house that had a great Christmas decoration.

It took me a while to get used to people who eat pop-corn during the movie.

**Relative pronoun used as an object:**

1) As can be seen from the table, referring to a person or thing, the relative pronoun may be omitted in the object position:

This is the man (who / that) I wanted to speak to and whose name I’d forgotten.

The library didn’t have the book (which / that) I wanted.

I didn’t like the book (which / that) John gave me.

This is the house where I lived when I first came to the US.

2) **whom:**

In American English, *whom* is not used very often. *Whom* is more formal than *who* and is very often omitted in speech:

Formal: The woman to whom you have just spoken is my teacher.

Informal: The woman (who) you have just spoken to is my teacher.

However, *whom* may not be omitted if preceded by a preposition:

I have found you the tutor for whom you were looking.

**Relative pronoun used as a possessive:**

*Whose* is the only possessive relative pronoun in English. It can be used with both people and things:

The family whose house burnt in the fire was immediately given a suite in a hotel.
The book whose author is now being shown in the news has become a bestseller.

*General remarks: That, Who, Which compared*

The relative pronoun that can only be used in defining clauses. It can also be substituted for *who* (referring to persons) or *which* (referring to things). That is often used in speech; who and which are more common in written English.

William Kellogg was the man that lived in the late 19th century and had some weird ideas about raising children. - spoken, less formal

William Kellogg was the man who lived in the late 19th century and had some weird ideas about raising children. - written, more formal

Although your computer may suggest to correct it, referring to things, *which* may be used in the defining clause to put additional emphasis on the explanation. Again, the sentence with which is more formal than the one with that: Note that since it is the defining clause, there is NO comma used preceding *which*:

The café that sells the best coffee in town has recently been closed. - less formal

The café which sells the best coffee in town has recently been closed. - more formal

*Some special uses of relative pronouns in defining clauses*

**that / who**

Referring to people, both that and who can be used. That may be used to referring to someone in general:

He is the kind of person that/who will never let you down.

I am looking for someone that/who could give me a ride to Chicago.

However, when a particular person is being spoken about, who is preferred:

The old lady who lives next door is a teacher.

The girl who wore a red dress attracted everybody’s attention at the party.

**that / which**

There several cases when that is more appropriate than and is preferred to which:

After the pronouns all, any(thing), every(thing), few, little, many, much, no(thing), none, some(thing):

The police usually ask for every detail that helps identify the missing person.

- *that* used as the subject

Marrying a congresswoman is all *(that)* she wants. - *that* used as the object

After verbs that answer the question WHAT? For example, *say, suggest, state, declare, hope, think, write,* etc. In this case, the whole relative clause functions as the object of the main clause:

Some people say *(that) success is one percent of talent and ninety-nine percent of hard work.*

The chairman stated at the meeting *(that) his company is part of a big-time entertainment industry.*

After the noun modified by an adjective in the superlative degree:

This is the funniest story *(that) I have ever read!* - *that* used as the object
After ordinal numbers, e.g., first, second, etc:

The first draft (that) we submitted was really horrible. - that used as the object

If the verb in the main clause is a form of BE:

This is a claim that has absolutely no reason in it. - that used as the subject

Relative Pronouns in Non-Defining Clauses

Non-defining relative clauses (also known as non-restrictive, or parenthetical, clauses) provide some additional information which is not essential and may be omitted without affecting the contents of the sentence. All relative pronouns EXCEPT *that* can be used in non-defining clauses; however, the pronouns MAY NOT be omitted. Non-defining clauses ARE separated by commas. The table below sums up the use of relative pronouns in non-defining clauses.

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a. Relative pronoun used as a subject:

The writer, who lives in this luxurious mansion, has just published his second novel.

b. Relative pronoun used as an object:

The house at the end of the street, which my grandfather built, needs renovating.

c. Relative pronoun used as a possessive:

William Kellogg, whose name has become a famous breakfast foods brand-name, had some weird ideas about raising children.

Some Special Uses of Relative Pronouns in Non-Defining Clauses

a. *which*

If you are referring to the previous clause as a whole, use *which*:

My friend eventually decided to get divorced, which upset me a lot.

b. *of whom, of which*

Use of *whom* for persons and *of which* for things or concepts after numbers and words such as

*most, many, some, both, none:*

I saw a lot of new people at the party, some of whom seemed familiar.

He was always coming up with new ideas, most of which were absolutely impracticable.