



ENGLISH GRAMMAR MADE CLEAR

Relative Clauses

Defining and non-defining relative clauses: who, which, that, whose, where and when, plus when to use commas.

the client **who** calledMadrid, **which** I love, ...the day **when** we met

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“Sound as capable in English as you are in your own language.”

What are relative clauses?

A **relative clause** gives more information about a noun. It starts with a relative pronoun (**who, which, that, whose, where, when**) and works like an adjective: it tells us **which** person or thing we mean, or adds **extra** detail. There are two types, and the difference is all about **commas**.

DEFINING

no commas

Essential information: it tells us *which one*. Without it, the sentence doesn't make sense.

The man who called you is my boss.

The report that you sent was great.

NON-DEFINING

, commas ,

Extra information about something we've already identified. You can remove it.

My boss, who is Italian, speaks four languages.

RELATIVE PRONOUNS

who · which · that...

who = people · *which* = things ·
that = both (defining only) ·
whose = possession · *where* = places · *when* = times

the colleague whose car was stolen

Three classic mistakes

- | | |
|--|--|
| ✗ The client ~~which~~ called was angry. | ✓ The client who called was angry. |
| ✗ My car, ~~that~~ is new, broke down. | ✓ My car, which is new, broke down. |
| ✗ The hotel where we stayed ~~there~~ was lovely. | ✓ The hotel where we stayed was lovely. |

Why is it so tricky to master?

- 1 Commas change the meaning.** *My brother who lives in Paris is a chef* (I have other brothers) vs *My brother, who lives in Paris, is a chef* (I have one brother).
- 2 That has limits.** It's very common in defining clauses, but you can never use it in a non-defining clause (after a comma).
- 3 Sometimes the pronoun disappears.** *The report (that) I wrote*: you can leave it out when it's the object, but not when it's the subject.
- 4 Don't repeat the subject or object.** The relative pronoun replaces *he, she, it, them*: *the file that I sent* ~~it~~.
- 5 Prepositions move.** Informal: *the person (who) I spoke to*. Formal: *the person to whom I spoke*.

The rules side by side

Defining

which one?

1 Identifies the person or thing

The candidate who we interviewed yesterday was excellent.

2 No commas

People who work from home are often more productive.

3 who, which or that

The laptop that / which I bought is fast.

4 You can omit the pronoun if it's the object

The email (that) you sent me was clear.

5 Common in definitions

A freelancer is someone who works for themselves.

6 whose, where, when

the company whose shares fell · the office where I work · the day when we launched

Non-defining

extra information

1 Adds extra information

Our CEO, who joined in 2019, is from Canada.

2 Always commas (a pause when speaking)

The report, which took weeks, is finished.

3 who or which, never that

Madrid, which I love, is my home.

4 You can't omit the pronoun

Laura, who I met in Rome, is a designer.

5 which can refer to a whole idea

He arrived late, which annoyed everyone.

6 Quantifiers + whom / which

some of, most of, all of, none of
We have 200 staff, most of whom work remotely.

Relative pronouns at a glance

who → people

which → things, animals

that → people or things (defining only)

whose → possession

the manager whose team won

where → places

when → times

the city where I grew up

Tricky points

Two things cause most problems: **when you can leave out the pronoun**, and how **commas** change what you mean.

Leaving it out

& prepositions

1 Object → you can omit it

The client (who) we met was very friendly.

2 Subject → you can't omit it

The client who met us was very friendly.

3 Quick test

Is there another subject after the pronoun? Then you can omit it.

the report (that) **she** wrote ✓ · the man **who** called ✓

4 Prepositions: informal vs formal

the colleague (who) I work with
the colleague with whom I work

5 where or which?

where = in / at which

the office **where** I work = the office **which** I work **in**
the office **which** I visited (not ~~where I visited~~)

What = the thing(s) that

What I need is a holiday. ✓ ~~The thing what I need X~~

Commas change the meaning

My sister who lives in Rome is a lawyer.

D I have more than one sister; this one lives in Rome.

My sister, who lives in Rome, is a lawyer.

ND I have one sister. Extra info: she lives in Rome.

The staff who worked late got a bonus.

D Only **some** staff got a bonus.

The staff, who worked late, got a bonus.

ND All the staff worked late and got a bonus.

The products which were damaged were returned.

D Only the damaged products were returned.

The products, which were damaged, were returned.

ND All the products were damaged and returned.

Exercises

1

Choose the pronoun

Circle the correct option.

1. That's the woman **who / which** interviewed me.
2. This is the software **who / which** we use for payroll.
3. The company **whose / who's** CEO resigned is in trouble.
4. Do you remember the hotel **where / which** we stayed?
5. 2020 was the year **when / where** everything changed.
6. I sent the file to Maria, **who / that** is our new designer.
7. The car **that / who** I rented was very small.
8. He's the colleague **whose / whom** advice I always follow.

2

Defining or non-defining?

Tick (✓) the box if the clause is **non-defining**. Then rewrite those sentences with commas.

1. The people who work in my team are very friendly. ☐
2. Barcelona which is on the coast is my favorite city. ☐
3. The laptop that I bought last week has stopped working. ☐
4. My manager who has worked here for 20 years is retiring. ☐
5. The Eiffel Tower which was built in 1889 attracts millions of visitors. ☐
6. Employees who arrive late must sign in at reception. ☐

Exercises

3

Join the sentences

Join each pair of sentences with a relative clause.

1. I met a woman. She works for Google.
I met _____
2. This is the report. I wrote it last week.
This is _____
3. Our Lisbon office is very modern. It opened in 2022.
Our Lisbon office, _____
4. That's the client. His company went bankrupt.
That's _____
5. I'll never forget the day. I got my first job on that day.
I'll never forget _____
6. Mr Smith is retiring. I've worked with him for ten years.
Mr Smith, _____

4

Can you leave it out?

Can you omit the relative pronoun? Circle **Yes** or **No**.

1. The book **that** you lent me was brilliant. (Yes / No)
2. The man **who** lives next door is a pilot. (Yes / No)
3. The project **which** we're working on is confidential. (Yes / No)
4. The colleague **who** helped me is on holiday. (Yes / No)
5. Is this the file **that** you were looking for? (Yes / No)
6. The company **which** makes these phones is Korean. (Yes / No)

Exercises

5

Find the mistake

Some sentences are correct. Tick (✓) the correct ones and rewrite the others correctly.

1. The woman which I met yesterday is a lawyer.

☐

2. Paris, that is the capital of France, is beautiful.

☐

3. This is the office where I work in.

☐

4. The man whose car was stolen called the police.

☐

5. He's the person who I told you about him.

☐

6. The client who's order was late complained.

☐

6

A company profile

Complete with **who, which, whose, where, when** or **whom**.

GreenLeaf is a company ¹ _____ produces eco-friendly packaging. It was founded in 2012 by Ana Ruiz, ² _____ idea came from a trip to Indonesia, ³ _____ she saw the effects of plastic waste. Ana, ⁴ _____ studied chemistry, spent two years developing a material ⁵ _____ breaks down in 90 days. 2018 was the year ⁶ _____ the company won its first international award. Today GreenLeaf has 120 employees, most of ⁷ _____ work in the Valencia factory.

7

Your turn

Complete the definitions with a relative clause.

1. A good manager is someone ...

2. My ideal office is a place ...

Answer key

1 Choose the pronoun

- | | | | | | |
|---------|----------|----------|----------|---------|--------|
| 1. who | 2. which | 3. whose | 4. where | 5. when | 6. who |
| 7. that | 8. whose | | | | |

2 Defining or non-defining?

- Defining: no commas
- ✓ Barcelona, which is on the coast, is my favorite city.
- Defining: no commas
- ✓ My manager, who has worked here for 20 years, is retiring.
- ✓ The Eiffel Tower, which was built in 1889, attracts millions of visitors.
- Defining: no commas

3 Join the sentences

- I met a woman **who / that works** for Google.
- This is the report **(that / which) I wrote** last week.
- Our Lisbon office, **which opened in 2022**, is very modern.
- That's the client **whose company** went bankrupt.
- I'll never forget the day **(when) I got** my first job.
- Mr Smith, **who I've worked with / with whom I've worked** for ten years, is retiring.

4 Can you leave it out?

- | | | | | | |
|--------|-------|--------|-------|--------|-------|
| 1. Yes | 2. No | 3. Yes | 4. No | 5. Yes | 6. No |
|--------|-------|--------|-------|--------|-------|

5 Find the mistake

- The woman **who / that** (or no pronoun) I met yesterday is a lawyer.
- Paris, **which** is the capital of France, is beautiful.
- This is the office **where I work / which I work in**.
- ✓ Correct
- He's the person who I told you **about**.
- The client **whose** order was late complained.

6 A company profile

- | | | | |
|-----------------|----------|----------|--------|
| 1. which / that | 2. whose | 3. where | 4. who |
| 5. which / that | 6. when | 7. whom | |

7 Your turn

- A good manager is someone **who** listens to their team.
- My ideal office is a place **where** I can work quietly.

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