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Relative Clauses

Sometimes, you may need or want to add additional information to a noun in a sentence for clarity, context, or style. One way to do this is to add an adjective (for example, “red ball”). Functioning similarly to an adjective, a relative clause (also known as an adjective clause) is a type of dependent clause that describes a noun. However, unlike an adjective, a relative clause follows the noun it’s describing and, like other clauses, always contains a subject and a verb. Grammar and style guides sometimes disagree on how to form relative clauses. This chapter presents rules to form relative clauses that sound grammatical to native English speakers. Most importantly, relative clauses are useful to combine simple sentences into a complex sentence. For example:

1. Amanda is a senior nun.
2. Amanda works at an old Christian church.
3. Amanda, **who works at an old Christian church**, is a senior nun.

The “Amanda” in the second sentence was replaced with the pronoun **who** in the third sentence, and the newly formed relative clause “who works at an old Christian church” was embedded into the first sentence to create a new, complex sentence. When forming sentences with relative clauses, which pronoun to use partly depends on if the pronoun functions as the subject or object in the relative clause. It also depends on whether the noun is alive; **who** and **that** can refer to people and animals, **that** can also refer to things, and **which** can only refer to things. In sentence 3 above, the word “Amanda” becomes the subject relative pronoun “who” when it gets embedded as a relative clause. See the flowcharts at the end of the chapter for more examples.

Clause Types

Two main types of relative clauses exist:

- A restrictive relative clause (also known as an essential or limiting clause) contains information necessary to identify (or restrict) the noun it’s describing and is not separated out with commas. You can use the pronouns **who**, **that**, **whom**, and **whose** to refer to people, animals and things. Please note that style and grammar guides disagree on whether **which** can be used in restrictive relative clauses, but **that** is often preferred.
- A non-restrictive relative clause (also known as a non-essential or non-limiting clause) contains information that is not necessary to identify (or restrict) the noun it’s describing and is separated out with commas to indicate that the clause is grammatically unnecessary. While restrictive relative clauses can only describe nouns, non-restrictive relative clauses can also describe the entire clause it’s attached to. You can use the pronouns **who**, **which**, **whom**, and **whose** to refer to people, animals or things. Please note that **that** can never be used in non-restrictive relative clauses.

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Deciding Which Type of Clause to Use

Determining whether a noun needs further explanation often depends on the context and assumed knowledge of the audience. If you are unsure, you can use the following test to determine if the relative clause is restrictive (necessary) or not:

If the question “which [noun]?” is logical because you need additional information to answer it, then use a restrictive relative clause:

- Police should only doubt the [people].
- Which [people]?
- Police should only doubt the [people] **who act suspiciously**. (The relative clause “who act suspiciously” is required to restrict the meaning of the preceding noun, “people”; otherwise, the readers do not know who the police should doubt. This assumes you have not previously given appropriate context about the people whom police doubt.)

If the question “which [noun]?” is illogical because you do not need additional information to understand the noun, then use a non-restrictive relative clause:

- [Amanda] had a mom.
- Which [Amanda]? (This question is illogical, assuming you previously have defined who Amanda is.)
- [Amanda], **who is a little girl with long hair**, had a mom. (Here, “Amanda” is a unique noun that does not need additional information to define it.)

Here is a visual way to see the difference between restrictive and non-restrictive relative clauses. The following sentence can be interpreted as a restrictive or non-restrictive relative clause, depending on the context:

- Example 1: Half the B Street apartments **which are owned by landlords** are already rented.



L = landlord

P = property management companies

“X” = rented

The restrictive relative clause “which are owned by landlords” restricts the noun phrase that precedes it (“half the B Street apartments”). Without commas, the restrictive relative clause adds additional necessary information to limit the subgroup of “half the B Street apartments” to only those which are owned by landlords.

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- Example 2: Half the B Street apartments, **which are owned by landlords**, are already rented.



L = landlord

P = property management companies

"X" = rented

The non-restrictive relative clause “which are owned by landlords” applies to the entire noun phrase that precedes it (“half the B Street apartments”). By using commas, the non-restrictive relative clause adds additional information to “half the B Street apartments” without limiting its subgroup to only those which are owned by landlords.

Reducing Relative Clauses

Restrictive Clauses: To make your writing more concise, you can reduce most types of restrictive relative clauses. For non-subject clauses, simply delete the pronoun. For subject clauses, delete the pronoun and the **to be** helping verb if you have one and change the main verb to the **-ing** form with active meaning or **-ed** form with passive meaning (for example, “Police should only doubt the people **who act suspiciously**” can be reduced to “Police should only doubt people **acting suspiciously**.”). However, indirect object clauses can only be reduced when the preposition is at the end of the clause, and possessive clauses can never be reduced.

Non-Restrictive Clauses: Many sources disagree about whether non-restrictive relative clauses can be reduced, and some sources call this reduced form an appositive (a noun that defines another noun). In general, you want to make sure your writing is clear and grammatical to the reader, so you should choose a style that best helps you make your point. In most cases, only subject and direct object relative clauses using a **to be** verb can be reduced by deleting the pronoun and **to be** verb (for example, “Amanda, **who is a girl with long hair**, had a mom” can be reduced to “Amanda, **a girl with long hair**, had a mom.”).

<https://tutoring.ucdavis.edu/agg/relative-clauses-lesson>

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Intermediate Practice

Each sentence below contains a relative clause. In the blanks, fill in the appropriate pronoun(s) to complete the sentence (**who, whom, that, which, whose, in which**) or use Ø to indicate no pronoun is needed.

Example: *She focuses on the products _____ are on sale.*

Answer: *She focuses on the products that/which are on sale.*

1. The people _____ are from the justice department are not just.
2. We usually had a test _____ required us to write down the vocabulary _____ we had learned from memory.
3. As she walked into the store, the owner, _____ seemed very old and humble, welcomed her with a warm smile.
4. Although she does not know what to get, the staff member _____ is a friend of her mom realizes that she needs help.
5. Giedt's restroom uses slide bolt latches, _____ are a locking device _____ a latch slides through the bolt receiver.
6. I need to write down each vocabulary word _____ I need to remember on a small paper.
7. I can connect to the author's point of how bilinguals must keep two sets of statistics in mind at once because what language I use depends on to _____ I am speaking.
8. I also learned that it's important to continue moving forward, to find a community _____ you feel part of.
9. His opinion states that a student _____ comes from a second year college generation and is financially stable will have resources to pay for education unlike a first year generation student _____ parents have a blue-collar job.
10. As Kuhl stated, having the ability to be bilingual allows many bilingual people to change to a specific language depending on _____ we are talking to.

Advanced Practice

Combine each set of sentences so that each newly formed sentence contains a relative clause. You may combine the sentences using reduced forms in any way that preserves the original meaning of the pair of sentences.

Example: *The people are from the justice department. The people are not just.*

Answer: *Full Form - The people **who are from the justice department** are not just. OR
Reduced Form - The people **from the justice department** are not just.*

1. The system doesn't include subjective factors like location and environment. Subject factors like location and environment have become huge factors in incoming freshmen's mindsets.
2. Students carry negative thoughts. Students often end up dropping out instead of seeking help.
3. The students end up being a victim of this feeling. The students have more chances of not finishing college with a degree.

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4. This is an example of the bystander effect. The bystander effect has people expecting others to solve someone's problems.
5. Mobile phones can be beneficial for people in developing countries. Mobile phones' industry belongs to the ICT.

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Answer Key

Intermediate Practice

1. The people **who/that** are from the justice department are not just.
2. We usually had a test **that/which** required us to write down the vocabulary **that/Ø** we had learned from memory.
3. As she walked into the store, the owner, **who** seemed very old and humble, welcomed her with a warm smile.
4. Although she does not know what to get, the staff member **who** is a friend of her mom realizes that she needs help.
5. Giedt's restroom uses slide bolt latches, **which** is a locking device **in which** a latch slides through the bolt receiver.
6. I need to write down each vocabulary word **that/which/Ø** I need to remember on a small paper.
7. I can connect to the author's point of how bilinguals must keep two sets of statistics in mind at once because what language I use depends on to **whom** I am speaking.
8. I also learned that it's important to continue moving forward, to find a community **that/which/Ø** you feel part of.
9. His opinion states that a student **who** comes from a second year college generation and is financially stable will have resources to pay for education unlike a first year generation student **whose** parents have a blue-collar job.
10. As Kuhl stated, having the ability to be bilingual allows many bilingual people to change to a specific language depending on **whom** we are talking to.

Advanced Practice

What follows is 1 possible combination of each sentence set. Some sets may have more than one possible combination. In each sentence, the relative clause is bolded.

1. The system doesn't include subjective factors like location and environment, **which have become huge factors in incoming freshmen's mindsets.**
2. Full form - Students **who carry negative thoughts** often end up dropping out instead of seeking help. OR Reduced form - Students **carrying negative thoughts** often end up dropping out instead of seeking help.
3. The students **who end up being a victim of this feeling** have more chances of not finishing college with a degree.
4. This is an example of the bystander effect **in which people expect others to solve someone's problems.**
5. Mobile phones, **whose industry belongs to the ICT**, can be beneficial for people in developing countries.