

Explanations

Subject or object

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Relative clauses give extra information about a noun in the main clause. Relative clauses begin with a relative pronoun (*who, which, that, whom, whose*). The relative pronoun can be the subject of the clause:

*That's the woman **who** bought my car.*

The woman (subject) bought my car (object). Or the object of the clause:

*That's the car **that** I used to own.*

I (subject) used to own the car (object).

- Combining sentences

Note how sentences are combined.

Subject: *This is Jean. She bought my car.*

*Jean is the person **who** bought my car.* *She* is not repeated, as the person is the subject.

Object: *That is Jean's car. I used to own it.*

*That's the car **that** I used to own.* *It* is not repeated, as *the car* is the object.

Defining or Non-defining

- Defining

Defining clauses give important information which tells us exactly what is being referred to.

*That book **which** you lent me is really good.*

This indicates which book we are talking about. Without the relative clause, it might be difficult to understand the meaning.

- Non-defining

Non-defining clauses add extra information. They are separated by commas in writing, and by a pause on either side (where the commas are) in speaking.

*The book, **which** I hadn't read, was still on the shelf.*

This gives extra information about the book. We could miss out the relative clause and the meaning would still be clear.

Omitting the relative pronoun

- Defining relative clauses

In a defining relative clause we can leave out the relative pronoun if it is the object of the clause.

That's the car (that) I used to own.

We cannot miss out the relative pronoun if it is the subject of the clause.

*That's the woman **who** bought my car.*

- Non-defining relative clauses

In a non-defining relative clause we cannot leave out the relative pronoun.

Which, who and that

- **That** instead of **which**
When we talk about things, *that* is often used instead of *which*.
This is very common in speech.
*Is this the house **that** you bought?*
- **That** instead of **who**
When we talk about people, *that* can be used instead of *who*.
This is less common, but we still do it, especially in speech.
*Have you met the boy **that** Sue is going to marry?*
- **Which** in non-defining clauses
That cannot be used to introduce a non-defining clause.
*The hotel, **which** was a hundred years old, was very comfortable.*
- Prepositions
That cannot be used after a preposition.
*This is the car (**that/which**) I paid £2000 **for**. (speech)*
*This is the car **for which** I paid £2000. (formal)*

Whom and whose

- **Whom** is the object form of *who*. It has to be used after prepositions.
Its use is formal and quite rare.
*This is the person (who) I sold my car **to**. (speech)*
*This is the person **to whom** I sold my car. (formal)*
- **Whose** means *of whom*, and usually refers to people.
This is Jack. His sister is staying with us.
*This is Jack, **whose** sister is staying with us.*

Key points

1 Long sentences with relative clauses are more common in writing. In speech it is more usual to join shorter clauses with conjunctions.

The hotel, which was miles from anywhere, was full of guests. (writing)
The hotel was miles from anywhere. It was full of guests. (speech)
The hotel was miles from anywhere, and it was full of guests. (speech)

2 In speech, relative pronouns are usually left out when they are the object of the clause.

This is the book I told you about.

3 In speech it is common to end relative clauses with a preposition.

*That's the girl I live next door **to**.*