

## Relative (Adjective) Clauses

### What is a Clause?

A clause is a group of words with its own subject and verb. A sentence can contain just one clause or many. There are two types of clauses: independent (or “main”) clauses contain a complete thought and could stand alone. Dependent (or “subordinate”) clauses can not; their meaning is **dependent** on another clause(s) in the sentence.

### Relative Clauses

Relative clauses, which are also called “adjective clauses,” are dependent clauses that describe a person, place, thing, or idea in a sentence. They normally begin with a relative pronoun (most commonly **who/whom, whose, which, that**) or with an adverb (such as **when** and **where**). Relative pronouns introduce and connect adjective clauses to the main clause.

The small studio **where I paint** is very bright.

The kiln **that has been malfunctioning** will be replaced this summer.

Notice where the relative clauses occur in these examples. Unlike single or hyphenated adjectives, such as *magnificent* or *blue-green*, which appear before the noun they modify, an adjective clause appears **after** the noun. This can cause confusion with speakers of certain other languages where adjective clauses: **1)** normally occur before the noun as one extended adjective, and **2)** lack relative pronouns.

### Restrictive versus Non-Restrictive

Where a relative clause limits or defines the meaning of the word or phrase it modifies, it is **restrictive** and not set off with commas.

The professor who teaches Art History 101 is an excellent lecturer.

Conversely, a relative clause providing additional information that is not essential to the noun’s meaning is **non-restrictive** and needs to be set off with commas.

In the first example, no commas are used because the adjective clause is necessary to identify which professor is meant. In the second sentence, commas are used because the clause is not necessary to identify Professor Jones; it simply provides additional information.

This rule is not always simple to apply, as the writer must determine *how* the meaning of the clause affects the noun it modifies. Compare the following sentences:

The sculpture which he admired was moved into the basement to make room for a new exhibit.  
The sculpture, which he admired, was moved into the basement to make room for a new exhibit.

In the first example, there could be many sculptures. The relative clause “*which he admired*” defines the particular sculpture that was moved. In the second example, either there is only one sculpture or the writer already established a particular one in previous sentences.

### Comma Use Summary

Restrictive clause = essential information = no comma

Non-restrictive = “extra” information = comma

Use of relative pronouns in relative clauses:

Function in the Sentence	Reference to...				
	People	Things/Ideas	Place	Time	Explanations
<b>Subject</b>	who, that	which, that			
<b>Object</b>	who, whom, that	which, that	where	when	why, what
<b>Possessive</b>	whose	whose, of which			

**Remember:** *that* and *what* can only be used in **restrictive clauses**

### Additional Tips

1. Use **that** if the main clause poses the question “which one?” answered by the relative clause:

The kiln **that has been malfunctioning** will be replaced this summer.

2. In restrictive clauses, object pronouns may be omitted:

The man ~~that~~ I met yesterday teaches Art History.

3. In non-restrictive clauses, object pronouns cannot be omitted and **that** may not be used:

Mr. Jones, whom I met yesterday, teaches Art History.

### Self-Quiz (answers on following page)

Can you tell which of the following sentences are wrong and why?

1. He comes from Venezuela that is a Spanish-speaking country.
2. I have some good advice for anyone who wants to learn a second language.
3. On the wall is a colorful poster, which portrays a group of young people who are dancing.
4. Before RISD, I didn't have an opportunity to talk with people who their native tongue is English.
5. An old man was fishing next to me on the pier was muttering to himself.
6. I invited ten people to my party some of which are my classmates.
7. The rice which we had for dinner last night was very good.
8. Rice which is grown in many countries is a staple food throughout the world.
9. According to a newspaper article which I read, the police arrested the man who had robbed the bank. The man, who was wearing a plaid shirt and blue jeans, was caught shortly afterwards.
10. My new shirt didn't fit, so I took it back to the store, where I'd bought it.
11. Summer is the time of year when the weather is the hottest.

The following sentences are correct. What's the difference between them in meaning?

12. The students who had done well on the test were excused from class early.
13. The students, who had done well on the test, were excused from class early.
14. He reached in the basket and threw away the apples that were rotten.
15. He reached in the basket and threw away the apples, which were rotten.

**Answers:**

1. Replace “that” with “which” because there is only one Venezuela (the relative clause is describing it, not distinguishing which one); put a comma after “Venezuela” because this is non-restrictive information.
2. Correct: the relative clause is restrictive, so no comma is necessary.
3. Correct: the first relative clause (“which portrays...”) is non-restrictive, so it needs a comma; the next restrictive clause (“who are dancing”) is necessary to understand the clause, so it needs no comma.
4. Replace “who” with “whose” and omit “their” because “whose” is a possessive relative pronoun that correctly conveys the meaning of both words.
5. Insert “who” after “man” because “was fishing” is not the verb of the sentence but should be a relative clause.
6. Replace “which” with “whom” because the relative clause describes people, not party; insert a comma after “party” because this is a non-restrictive relative clause.
7. Correct: which rice is a restrictive relative clause.
8. Put commas after “Rice” and “countries” because the relative clause is non-restrictive.
9. Correct: The first sentence clarifies one of many articles with the clause “which I read,” making it a restrictive relative clause; if there were only one article and the writer were simply adding that she read it, then a comma would be necessary after “article.” The relative clause in the second sentence is non-restrictive, so it needs the commas.
10. Omit comma after “store” because “where I’d bought it” clarifies which store.
11. Correct: the relative clause is restrictive.
12. Because the relative clause is presented as restrictive, only some students had done well and only those students were excused early.
13. Because the relative clause is presented as non-restrictive, all the students had done well and were excused early.
14. Because the relative clause is presented as restrictive, only some apples were rotten and he only threw out those apples.
15. Because the relative clause is presented as non-restrictive, all the apples were rotten and thrown out.