RELATIVE CLAUSE

**Introduction**

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| Terms | Definition |
| *clause* | *A clause* is a group of words containing a subject and a verb. |
| *independent clause* | *An independent clause* is a complete sentence. It contains the main subject and verb of a sentence. (It is also called *a main clause*.) |
| *dependent clause* | *A dependent clause* is not a complete sentence. It must be connected to an independent clause. |
| *adjective clause* | *An adjective clause* is a dependent clause that modifies a noun.  It describes, identifies, or gives further information about a noun.  (An adjective clause is also called *a relative clause*.) |
| *relative pronoun* | A *relative pronoun* is a word that introduces a dependent (or relative) clause and connects it to an independent clause. A clause beginning with a **relative pronoun** is poised to answer questions such as *Which one? How many?* or *What kind?* *Who, whom, what, which*, and *that* are all **relative pronouns**. |

**Relative clauses** are also sometimes referred to as *adjective clauses*, because they identify or give us additional information about the subject of the independent clause they relate to. Like adjectives, these clauses in some way *describe* that subject.

**Relative pronouns**, like conjunctions, are words that join clauses—in this case, a relative clause to its main clause. The type of **relative pronoun** used depends on what kind of noun is being described.

* *Who*: Refers to a person (as the verb’s subject)
  + The woman who came to the door left flowers for you.
* *Whom*: Refers to a person (as the verb’s object)
  + I am not sure whom this book belongs to.
* *Which*: Refers to an animal or thing
  + Interpretative dance, which I find a bit disconcerting, is all the rage.
* *What*: Refers to a nonliving thing
  + Is this what you were talking about?
* *That*: Refers to a person, animal, or thing
  + She finally visited the coffee shop that had such great reviews.

**A relative clause is dependent clause**: that is, the information it contains cannot stand alone,   
it is dependent on the information contained in the previous (independent) clause.

A relative clause is introduced by a relative pronoun such as *who, whose, whom, that or which.* Relative clauses can also be introduced by relative adverbs such as *when, where, why.* The function of relative clauses is to modify or describe a noun or pronoun in the independent clause (Oshima and Hogue, 1991: 208).

Here are some examples of relative clauses. The relative clause in each sentence is underlined:

* The waterfront workers who were on strike blocked the entrance to the dock.  
  (only the waterfront workers who were on strike blocked the entrance)
* Library books which are overdue will incur a fine.
* The exam that caused the most anxiety was Statistics.
* The room where staff and students meet is located in the main building.

Notice that there are **no commas** in these sentences. This is because the relative clause is part of the independent clause: it serves to define and identify it. This type of relative clause is called a **defining relative clause.**

Another type of relative clause exists: the **non-defining relative clause**. Non-defining relative clauses provide additional information about the nominal group, but these types of relative clauses are NOT part of the independent clause. Below are some examples of non-defining relative clauses:

* The waterfront workers, who were on strike, blocked the entrance to the dock.  
  (all the workers were on strike, and they all blocked the entrance.)
* Your library books, which are overdue, should be returned immediately.  
  (all of your library books are overdue and they all should be returned immediately.)
* The statistics exam, which I no doubt will fail, is finally over.

Defining Relative Clauses

**Defining relative clauses** are a useful way of condensing information and avoiding unnecessary repetition in your writing. The repetition in the following sentences, for example, could be avoided by creating a defining relative clause.

(1)

* Some of the waterfront workers were on strike. Some of the waterfront workers blocked the entrance to the dock.
* The waterfront workers who were on strike blocked the entrance to the dock.

(2)

* Japanese cars are popular in the USA. This situation is a major problem for the auto industry.
* A situation that is causing a major problem in the auto industry is the popularity of Japanese cars.

**Defining relative clauses** specify a noun or pronoun in the main clause and   
are necessary if we want to understand the meaning of a sentence.

* I saw the girl who was outside our house.
* They wanted the picture that cost two pounds.

If we omit them, it is not clear what girl or picture we are talking about. They follow after the pronouns who, which, that, whose and whom. We do not write them with commas.

**Who**for persons:  
The man who called you has just arrived.

**Which**for things:  
This is the book which I wanted.

**That**for persons and things:  
Are you the boy that lives next door?Can you see the tree that has no leaves?

Note: That is less formal than who or which.

**Practice 1: Replace ‘*that*’ with ‘*who*’ or ‘*which*’**

1. A soldier is someone that works in the army.

A soldier is someone who works in the army.

1. An ostrich is a bird that cannot fly.

An ostrich is a bird which cannot fly.

1. A cook is someone that makes meals at a restaurant.

A cook is someone who makes meals at a restaurant.

1. A tire is a thing that you can find on a wheel.

A tire is a thing which you can find on a wheel.

1. A stick is a piece of wood that is long and thing.

A stick is a piece of wood which is long and thing.

1. Doctors are people that treat patients.

Doctors are people who treat patients.

1. All the words that exist in a language are called vocabulary.

All the words which exist in a language are called vocabulary.

1. Our solar system is the collection of eight planets and their moons that orbit the Sun.

Our solar system is the collection of eight planets and their moons which

orbit the Sun.

1. A sister-in-law is a woman that marries your brother or is your husband's sister.

A sister-in-law is a woman who marries your brother or is your husband's

sister.

**Who vs whom**

**Whom** is the object of a verb. We use it for persons. The meaning is similar to who.

* The man whom I met yesterday...
* This is the girl whom I saw at the party.

**Whom** is very formal. In spoken English who or that are much more common.

* The man who I met...
* The man that I met...
* This is the girl who I saw...
* This is the girl that I saw...

We can also leave out the pronoun. It is the most usual form.

* The man I met... This is the girl I met...

If the subject in the main clause is different from the subject in the defining relative clause, we normally leave out the pronoun.

* The student you saw in Oxford is my neighbour. (The subjects are the student and you.)
* The bike she borrowed belongs to me. (The subjects are the bike and she.)

**Be careful**!  
If the subjects in both parts of a sentence are the same, we cannot omit the pronoun, because it becomes the subject of the clause.

* The driver who took you to school is from York.
* The pen that is on the desk is new.

There is only one subject in each sentence - the driver and the pen. If we leave out the subject, it will not be clear what we mean.

Wrong: The driver took you to school is from York.(This sentence does not make any sense.)

Possessive Relative Pronouns

It surprises some people to learn that both *who* and *which* can take the possessive form *whose*. Some will argue that *of which* is a better construction when talking about things rather than people, but this results in unnecessary awkwardness. The truth is that *whose* has been widely and correctly applied to nonhumans for hundreds of years.

* She apologized to the boy whose glasses got broken.
* The house whose owner is on vacation has an unsightly garden.
* The house, the owner of which is on vacation, has an unsightly garden. (This is correct but cumbersome.)

**Using ‘*whose*’ in relative clause**

***‘Whose’*** shows possession. It carries the same meaning as other possessive pronouns used as adjectives: *his, her, its* and *their.* Like *his, her, its* and *their, ‘***whose**’is connected to a noun**.**

Both *‘***whose**’ and the noun it is connected to are placed at the beginning of the adjective clause. *‘****W*hose**’ cannot be omitted.

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| 1. The man called the police. **His car** was stolen.   (Note: The stolen car belongs to the man) | His car whose car |
| 1. The man ***whose car*** *was stolen* called the police. | |

* In (a): *His car* can be changed to *whose car* to make a relative clause.
* In (b): ‘*whose car was stolen’* = a relative clause

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| 1. I know a girl. **Her brother** is a movie star. | Her brother whose brother |
| 1. I know a girl ***whose*** ***brother*** *is a movie star*. | |

* In (c): *Her brother* can be changed to *whose brother* to make a relative clause.

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| 1. The people were friendly. We bought **their house.** | their house whose house |
| 1. The people ***whose*** ***house*** *we bought* were friendly. | |

* In (e): *Their house* can be changed to *whose house* to make a relative clause.

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| 1. The student writes well. I read **her composition.** | her composition whose composition |
| 1. The student ***whose composition*** *I read* writes well. | |

* In (g): *her composition* can be changed to *whose composition* to make a relative clause.

***‘Whose’*** usually modifies “people” or “person” like in (b), (d) and (f). However, it may also be used to modify “things,” as in (j):

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| 1. The scientist created a new juice extracting machine. ***Its value*** is inestimable. | Its value whose value |
| 1. The scientist created a new juice extracting machine ***whose value*** *is inestimable*. | |

**Practice 2: Fill in each blank space with *who, whom* or *whose*.**

1. Could you please tell me who that was?

2. The men, two of whom were drunk, walked very slowly.

3. The guy whose computer I was using moved to Spain.

4. She didn’t know when the book was written, or by who.

5. I didn't know whose book that was.

6. I don't know who gave you that information, but it's inaccurate.

7. The police expert was able to determine whose fingerprints were on the knife.

8. These are some of the people who have helped me in the past.

9. I have no idea who left the lights on all night.

**Practice 3: Complete the exercise with *who, whom, whose* or *where*.**

1. What's the name of the man whose car you borrowed?

2. A nursing home is a place where old people are taken care of.

3. A pacifist is a person who believes that all wars are wrong.

4. An orphan is a child whose parents have passed away.

5. The town where we spent the holidays was very beautiful.

6. This school is only for children whom first language is not English.

7. I don't know the name of the woman to whom I spoke on the phone.

**Practice 4: Complete the following exercise with correct relative pronouns, choosing from the items given.**

1. Jake and Jessica Carter, who (that / who) got married about a year ago, recently bought a new house.
2. The neighbourhood in which (that / in which) they have been living is a somewhat dangerous one.
3. The neighbourhood that (that / who) they are moving into is much safer.
4. Their new house, which (that / which) they bought quite cheaply, does need some fixing up.
5. However, they will be receiving some help from their neighbours, most of whom (who / whom) they like.
6. The Flintstones who (who / whom) live next door to them, have volunteered to lend their tools.
7. The Jetsons who (who / whom) live across the street from Jake and Jessica, have promised to help them put in a new lawn.
8. The Flintstones, whose (who / whose) daughter is the same age as Mackenzie, Jake and Jessica's daughter, are helping Mackenzie make new friends.
9. Jessica, who (that / who) works for a county hospital, will still have to commute to work.
10. Jake, whose (whom / whose) company is nearby, will be able to walk to work.

**Practice 5: Combine the two sentences. Use the second sentence as a relative clause.**

1. I apologise to the woman. I spilled her coffee.

I apologise to the woman whose coffee I spilled.

1. The man called the police. His office was broken into.

The man whose office was broken into called the police.

1. I met the woman. Her husband is the president of the corporation.

I met the woman whose husband is the president of the corporation.

1. The professor is excellent. I am taking her course.

The professor whose course I am taking is excellent.

1. Mr. Noah teaches a class for undergraduate students. Their native language is not English.

Mr. Noah teaches a class for undergraduate students whom native language is not English.

1. I come from a famous country. Its history goes back thousands of years.

I come from a famous country whose history goes back thousands of years.

1. The people of Malaysia were friendly. We visited their houses.

The people of Malaysia whose houses we visited were friendly.

1. I have to call the man. I accidentally picked up his umbrella after the meeting.

I have to call the man whose umbrella I accidentally picked up after the meeting.

1. Dianne lives in a dormitory. Its residents come from many countries.

Dianne lives in a dormitory which residents come from many countries.

1. Ahmad gave the man some money. The man’s wallet was stolen.

Ahmad gave the man whose wallet was stolen some money.

**Practice 6: Join the sentences and make relative clauses with 'that' or 'whose'.**

1. I liked the house. Its roof was made of red tiles.

I liked the house whose roof was made of red tiles.

1. A spade is a tool. You dig with it.

A spade is a tool that you dig with.

1. Here is the museum. I told you about it.

Here is the museum that I told you about.

1. I can't respect politicians. Their only ambition is to be in power.

I can't respect politicians whose only ambition is to be in power.

1. This is the man. We bought the ring from him.

This is the man that we bought the ring from.

1. We can't afford new cars. Their price is too high.

We can't afford new cars whose price is too high.

1. The film is about a king. His brother kills him.

The film is about a king whose brother kills him.

1. I met some people. Their houses were badly damaged.

I met some people whose houses were badly damaged.

1. What have you done with the pen? I left it on the table.

What have you done with the pen that I left on the table?

1. I can hear the noise. It comes from the garage.

I can hear the noise that it comes from the garage.

1. Miss Clark's pronunciation is clear. I can understand her.

I can understand Miss Clark whose pronunciation is so clear.

1. Can you see the town? It's York.

The town that you can see is York.