

Relative Pronouns in French

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The point of relative pronouns is to avoid repetition. If you don't use them when possible, AP graders will see that as a mistake.

Que et Qui

Ask yourself one question:

What are you trying to relate? If it's a subject, use *qui*. If it's a direct object, use *que*.

Exemple: C'est la fille qui me connaît. (*la fille* is the subject)

C'est la fille que je connais. (*connaître quelqu'un - la fille* is the object)

Voilà !

Introduction to prepositions with relative pronouns

It may at first seem tempting to simply continue using *qui* and *que* when a preposition gets involved: after all, why not? However, this usage does not exactly work in French.

Several millennia ago, there lived some old dudes called the Romans. Well, the Romans spoke a language we now call Latin, which had these funny little words that were not like most words: they were not quite *things or ideas* (nouns), nor were they *actions* (verbs). But all of these words had one thing in common: *they always came right before a thing-word or an idea-word*, so somebody with a bright idea started to call them *prepositions*. This rule was a strict rule, and it was followed exactly; no prepositions were allowed to wander away from their noun.

Fast forward a bit, and Latin had evolved into a new languages, including one called French. And of course, prepositions still existed, because nobody had been told to get rid of them. But at the same time, a new language, which did *not* descend from Latin, came into prominence: English. However, English was different, because it never inherited the Latin tradition of "*prepositions come before a noun.*" English had words that were *kind of* like Latin prepositions, so grammarians were like "okay swag let's just call them prepositions anyways." But since tricky little English did not play by the same rules as its mother French, it didn't have to put prepositions before anything: for example, "this is the girl who I talked **to**," with the preposition **to** in front of nothing at all. Distinct histories explain why French and English differ on the account of prepositions.

Okay, fine- nice story. But then *how* does French uses prepositions when English puts them in front of nothing? How could they be translated? Well, there are a few ways...

Preposition + Qui

This must be used when there is a preposition present and you are talking about a person/living thing. (An exception, however, is when that preposition is *de*; you'll find what to do about *de* + *qui* below.)

*Exemple: *C'est la fille que/qui j'ai parlé à* is **wrong**. Sentences cannot end with prepositions. Instead, *C'est la fille à qui j'ai parlé*.

Exemple: Jean Smith est la personne avec qui je veux travailler.
Jean Smith is the person **with whom** I want to work.
Alternatively, Jean Smith is the person **who** I want to work **with**.

Additional examples may be found in the *Reprise*.

Preposition + Que

Remember the rule in the “Introduction to Prepositions with Relative Pronouns ” section at the beginning, saying that French prepositions *always* have to be in front of a noun? Well, ha ha, that rule is coming back to bite us, because— have you noticed that *que* isn't exactly a noun? After all, you wouldn't ever say, “J'ai un *que*,” whatever that means. (Sure, we call it a “relative pronoun,” but “que” is not really a person, place, thing, or idea, so it can't be used as a regular noun.) So French needs some words that are (almost) regular nouns instead of *que*. Those are *lequel / laquelle / lequel / lesquelles*.

A preposition can precede *lequel* and its friends to signify that an object would have been placed after a preposition. There are a few changes with the prepositions *à* and *de*, which are discussed below.

Exemple: Le français est un cours pour lequel nous devons étudier.
French is a class **for which** we have to study.
Alternatively, French is a class **which** we have to study **for**.

With the preposition *à*, we use *auquel / à laquelle / auxquels / auxquelles*.

Exemple: C'est le café **auquel** je l'ai vu. (because voir quelqu'un à quelque part)
This is the café **at which** I saw it.
Alternatively, this is the café **which** I saw it **at**.
→ This can also be replaced with *où*, because the café is a place.

With the preposition *de*, we use *dont*. (You could say *duquel* and stuff instead of *dont*, but nobody does that, so you can pretend that *duquel* and friends don't exist.)

Exemple: Les sculpteurs parlent du chef d'oeuvre
The sculptors talk about the masterpiece. (This becomes...)
C'est le chef d'oeuvre **dont** les sculpteurs parlent. (because of parler **de**)
It's the masterpiece **about which** the sculptors talk.
Alternatively, it's the masterpiece **which** the sculptors talk **about**.

Ce qui, ce que, ce dont, et où

It's very simple to choose between the two. Ask yourself one question:

Is the subject defined in the sentence? If so, is the object?

If the subject is not defined, you must use *ce qui*.

If the object is not defined, you must use *ce que*.

An easy way to remember the meaning is that *ce + pronom relatif* essentially means *what* in English. That's because *ce* means "it" or "this" (almost), as in *c'est* (which means "it is" or "this is"), so when you add *que* or *qui*, you get "it that..." or "this that..." as in *I do not know it that I want to order*— in other words, the same thing as *I do not know what I want to order*.

Exemple: Je ne sais pas **ce que** je veux.
I do not know **what** I want.
→ We don't know what the direct object is, as it's not told what the direct object is. Thus, we must use *ce que*.

Exemple: Je ne sais pas *ce qui* est dedans.

We don't know what is inside (*dedans* means inside), so the subject is **not** clear. Thus, we use *ce qui*.

What's the difference between *ce que* and *ce dont*?

Ce que replaces an unclear *direct object*. If you can say *verb quelque chose* without using any prepositions, the verb takes a direct object. Examples include *vouloir quelque*

chose, manger quelque chose, etc. You can only use *ce que* if the verb takes a direct object.

If the verb takes an *indirect object* (*verb + à + quelque chose*), as in *réussir à*, you must use *ce à quoi*. It means basically the same thing as *ce que*, yet can be used for indirect objects.

Exemple: Tu sais ce à quoi il s'intéresse ? (*s'intéresser à*)

If the verb takes neither (*verb + de + quelque chose*), you use *ce dont*, as in *se souvenir de, se rappeler de*.

Exemple: Ce dont j'ai besoin, c'est une bonne note. (*avoir besoin de*)

Sometimes, you can use où, if it's a place

For example, *aller*. *Aller* takes many prepositions, like *à* for a city, *au* and *en* for countries, etc. How do you replace that? What all these have in common is that they're places, and we already know that *où* can refer to places because that's how we'd use it in questions: *où?* (*where?*). So, we just say *où* to replace a preposition of place.

Exemple: *Tu te souviens d'où tu veux aller?* (*Se souvenir de* = to remember)
Do you remember **where** you want to go?
C'est le café **où** je l'ai vue.
It's the cafe **where** I saw it.