

Relative clauses give us more information about someone or something. We can use relative clauses to combine clauses without repeating information.

Compare

*The couple posted a Ramadan present to their daughter, **who lives in West Africa.***

The couple posted a Ramadan present to their daughter.

Their daughter lives in West Africa.

Using a relative clause means that there is no need to repeat 'their daughter'.

We can use relative clauses to give focus to something or someone.

Compare

*This is the book **which we're reading at the moment.***

We're reading this book at the moment.

*She's the woman **who I was talking about.***

I was talking about the woman.

Types of relative clause

There are two types of relative clause: one type refers to a noun or noun phrase (these are defining and non-defining relative clauses) and the other type refers to a whole sentence or clause, especially in speaking.

Defining and non-defining relative clauses

Defining and non-defining relative clauses define or describe the noun (or noun phrase) that comes before them (In the examples, the relative clause is in **bold**, and the person or thing that is referred to is underlined.):

He's going to show you the rooms **that are available**. (that are available defines the rooms; it tells us which rooms)

Umar, 22, **who boxed in two Olympics**, will be managed by his close friend Barry.

Relative clauses referring to a whole sentence

The other type of relative clause refers to a whole sentence or stretch of language (they are sometimes called sentential relative clauses). This type of relative clause is always introduced with *which*. In writing we usually put a comma before *which*:

But I think Sean was a bit upset about that, **which is understandable**. (*which is understandable* refers to the whole clause before it [underlined]: that Sean was upset about something)

She goes to Canada and stays with her daughter, and then her daughter comes here the next year. Every other year they change places you know. **Which is nice**. (*Which is nice* refers to the whole stretch of text before it [underlined]. This is common in speaking but not in writing.)

Relative clauses: defining relative clauses

Do you know how to define who or what you are talking about using relative clauses? Test what you know with interactive exercises and read the explanation to help you.

Look at these examples to see how defining relative clauses are used.

*Are you the one who sent me the email?
The phone which has the most features is also the most expensive.
This is the video that I wanted to show you.
The person they spoke to was really helpful.*

Grammar explanation

Relative clauses give us information about the person or thing mentioned.

Defining relative clauses give us essential information – information that tells us who or what we are talking about.

*The woman **who lives next door** works in a bank.*

*These are the flights **that have been cancelled**.*

We usually use a relative pronoun or adverb to start a defining relative clause: who, which, that, when, where or whose.

who/that

We can use who or that to talk about people. that is more common and a bit more informal.

*She's the woman **who** cuts my hair.*

*He's the man **that** I met at the conference.*

which/that

We can use which or that to talk about things. that is more common and a bit more informal.

There was a one-year guarantee **which** came with the TV.
The laptop **that** I bought last week has started making a strange noise!

Other pronouns

when can refer to a time.

Summer is the season **when** I'm happiest.

where can refer to a place.

That's the stadium **where** Real Madrid play.

whose refers to the person that something belongs to.

He's a musician **whose** albums have sold millions.

Omitting the relative pronoun

Sometimes we can leave out the relative pronoun. For example, we can usually leave out *who*, *which* or *that* if it is followed by a subject.

The assistant [that] **we** met was really kind.

(*we* = subject, can omit *that*)

We can't usually leave it out if it is followed by a verb.

The assistant **that helped** us was really kind.

(*helped* = verb, can't omit *that*)

Do this exercise to test your grammar again.