12

Relative Clauses

Relative clauses let us pack information about a noun into the same sentence: *The woman **who lives next door** is a surgeon.*

12.1 The relative pronouns

	For people	For things
Subject	*who, that*	*which, that*
Object	*who(m), that, —*	*which, that, —*
Possessive	*whose*	*whose, of which*

- Subject: *the author **who/that** wrote this; a machine **which/that** counts votes*
- Object (pronoun optional): *the film (**that**) we saw; the man (**who(m)**) I met*
- Possessive: *the student **whose** phone rang; a house **whose** windows face the sea*
- Place, time, reason: *the town **where** I grew up; the day **when** we met; the reason **why** she left*

Common Error

Do not add a second pronoun for the same role: ✗ *The book that I read **it** was fascinating.* → ✓ *The book that I read was fascinating.*
✗ *The city where I live **there**. . .* → ✓ *The city where I live. . .*

12.2 Defining vs. non-defining clauses

Key Point

A **defining** clause identifies which one we mean — no commas, and *that* is allowed: *The keys **that open the safe** are missing.* A **non-defining** clause adds extra, omissible information — commas required, *that* forbidden, pronoun never omitted: *My father, **who is 82**, still drives.*

The commas change meaning:

- *The passengers **who felt ill** were taken ashore.* (only those who felt ill)
- *The passengers, **who felt ill**, were taken ashore.* (all of them — and, by the way, they felt ill)

Usage Note

American editorial style reserves *which* for non-defining clauses (*the report, which was late,. . .*) and prefers *that* in defining ones (*the report that was late*). British usage happily allows defining *which* (*the report which was late*). Both systems are correct; follow your style guide.

12.3 Prepositions in relative clauses

- Informal (preposition at the end): *the flat (that) she lives **in**; the people (that) I work **with***
- Formal (preposition + *whom/which*): *the flat **in which** she lives; the colleagues **with whom** I work*
- Never *that* after a preposition: ✗ *the house in that I grew up* → ✓ *the house in which I grew up / the house (that) I grew up in*

12.4 *which* referring to a whole clause

Non-defining *which* can comment on the entire preceding statement: *The train was two hours late, **which meant** we missed the connection.* In careful writing, make sure the reference is clear (see Chapter 28 on ambiguity).

12.5 Quantifier + *of whom/which*

Elegant in formal writing: *The company employs 300 people, **most of whom** work remotely. He owns four cars, **none of which** he drives. She made several claims, **some of which** were later disproved.*

12.6 Reduced relative clauses

Relative pronoun + *be* can often be deleted:

- Active meaning → *-ing*: *the woman **(who is) standing** by the door; anyone **wanting** tickets*
- Passive meaning → past participle: *the issues **(that were) raised** at the meeting; a novel **written** in exile*
- Infinitive after superlatives and *first/last/only*: *the first woman **to win** two Nobel Prizes; the only person **to object***

(Full treatment of participle clauses in Chapter 19.)

Exercises

Exercise 12.1 Combine

Join each pair into one sentence with a relative clause.

1. The nurse was very kind. She looked after my mother.
2. A bypass is a road. It goes around a town.
3. Marie Curie won two Nobel Prizes. Her research changed physics.
4. We stayed in a village. Picasso was born there.
5. My laptop has crashed again. I bought it only last month. (non-defining)

Exercise 12.2 Commas or no commas?

Add commas where needed, or write "no commas".

1. My sister who lives in Canada is visiting us. (I have one sister)
2. The candidates who failed the first test were eliminated. (only some failed)
3. Mount Fuji which last erupted in 1707 attracts millions of climbers.

4. The novel that won the prize is out of print.

Exercise 12.3 Reduce

Shorten the relative clause where possible.

1. The man who is talking to Sara is my uncle.
2. Applications that are received after May 1 will not be considered.
3. She was the first athlete who broke the record twice.
4. Students who wish to attend should register online.