

A relative (or adjective) clause modifies a noun or pronoun and is introduced by a relative pronoun (**who**, **whom**, **whose**, **which**, or **that**) or occasionally a relative adverb (usually **when**, **where**, or **why**). Relative clauses function as subordinate or dependent clauses and therefore cannot stand alone as complete sentences. The relative pronoun (or adverb) is used to connect the relative clause to an independent clause by referring to the noun or pronoun being modified.

Relative clauses are extremely useful because they enable writers to be more specific and make writing more sophisticated. At the same time, they are confusing to many writers and often used incorrectly. The most common difficulties occur in understanding the structure of relative clauses, choosing the right pronoun (or adverb), using the correct punctuation, and maintaining subject-verb agreement.

## THE STRUCTURE OF RELATIVE CLAUSES

A relative pronoun (or adverb) generally follows and points back to the noun or pronoun it modifies, and like all clauses, both dependent and independent, relative clauses have a subject and a verb.

The students **who were most impressive** graduated with honors.

In the sentence above, the relative pronoun “**who**” introduces the relative clause “**who were most impressive.**” The relative clause modifies the plural noun “**students.**” The word “**who**” is the subject of the relative clause and “**were**” is the verb.

The following is another example: “It was an experience **that influenced my career choice.**” In this sentence, the relative pronoun “**that**” introduces the relative clause “**that influenced my career choice,**” which modifies the singular noun “**experience.**” The word “**that**” is the subject of the relative clause and “**influenced**” is the verb.

Although a relative pronoun (or adverb) usually introduces a relative clause, in some cases the pronoun follows a preposition:

We have many blessings **for which we are deeply grateful.**

In this sentence, the relative pronoun “**which**” is preceded by the preposition “**for,**” clarifying the relationship of the relative clause to the noun it modifies.

## TYPES OF RELATIVE CLAUSES

There are two types of relative clauses: restrictive and nonrestrictive. Each type has a different function within a sentence and requires different punctuation.

### Restrictive Relative Clauses

A restrictive relative clause defines or limits the meaning of the word it modifies, which makes it essential to the meaning of the sentence. Restrictive relative clauses are not set off by commas.

Women **who work** are happier than women **who don't work**.

In the above sentence, the relative clauses “**who work**” and “**who don't work**” are used to make the noun “**women**” more specific. This type of relative clause changes the meaning of the noun it modifies. In essence, women “**who work**” and those “**who don't work**” represent two different groups of women. Without the appropriate relative clauses, this meaning would not be clear to the reader.

Here are some additional examples of sentences that show how a relative clause can change the meaning of a noun.

Students learn a lot.  
Students **who ask questions** learn a lot.

Teachers are unpopular  
Teachers **who give a lot of assignments** are unpopular.

### Nonrestrictive Relative Clauses

A nonrestrictive relative clause describes a noun or pronoun whose meaning is already defined or limited. As a result, the additional information is not essential and if the nonrestrictive element was removed it would not significantly change your understanding of the sentence.

Going to the movies, **which I love to do**, can be very expensive.

In the above sentence, the relative clause “**which I love to do**” modifies “**Going to the movies**,” but the additional information does not change the basic meaning of the sentence: Going to the movies can be very expensive.

The following is another example: “Creativity, **which may take many forms**, is a quality all human beings have.” The relative clause “**which may take many forms**” modifies “**Creativity**,” but the additional information does not change the basic meaning of the sentence.

## CHOOSING A RELATIVE PRONOUN

The three most common relative pronouns are **who**, **which**, and **that**, but the choice of pronoun depends upon the noun or pronoun modified by the clause.

### The relative pronoun “**who**”:

- refers to a person or people
- may be used with a clause that makes a noun specific (a restrictive clause)
- may be used with a clause that adds information (a nonrestrictive clause)

People **who live in New York** lead very busy lives.

My sister, **who works for the YMCA**, leads a very active life.

### The relative pronoun “**which**”:

- refers to a thing or concept
- is most often used in clauses that add information
- is sometimes used in a clause that makes a noun specific (usually when a speaker or writer wants to sound more formal)

The Empire State Building, **which used to be the tallest building in the world**, is still a popular tourist attraction.

### The relative pronoun “**that**”:

- most often refers to a thing or concept
- is used only in clauses that make a noun more specific
- is sometimes used to refer to a person or people (usually only in informal writing or in speaking)

The lessons **that we have learned** are no more important than the lessons **that we have yet to learn**.

In academic or formal writing, the relative pronoun “**who**” is preferred when referring to a person or people: “The girl **who lives next door** was accepted into the nursing program.” However, some writers as well as speakers will interchange “**who**” with “**that**.” It is best to use “**that**” when referring to things or concepts with the exception of a group or class of people.

The favorite to win the tournament was the team **that was disqualified**.

Selection of the jury **that would hear the case** was time consuming.

The class **that scored highest on the exam** was acknowledged by the administration.

## The relative pronouns “where” and “when”:

- are used for a clause that refers to a place or time
- may be used for clauses that make a noun more specific
- may be used for clauses that add information

New York is a place **where people of many different cultures live and work together.**

New York City, **where millions of immigrants live**, is sometimes called a Melting Pot.

The 1960s was a time **when many Americans began to question the actions of their government.**

In the 1970s, **when many new rights and freedoms had been gained**, people began to lead quieter, more private lives.

## CHOOSING BETWEEN WHO, WHOM, AND WHOSE

In academic or formal writing, the relative pronouns **who** (or **whoever**), **whom** (or **whomever**), and **whose** are used to refer to people. The appropriate word choice is determined by the grammatical function of the pronoun within the clause.

- **Using the relative pronoun “who” or “whoever”:**

If the relative pronoun functions as a subject or subject complement, use “**who**” or “**whoever**”:

I know a woman **who has two children.**

In the sentence above, “**who**” introduces a restrictive relative clause that modifies the word “**woman**” and functions as the subject of the clause and “**has**” is the verb.

The director will choose **whoever has the best audition.**

In this sentence, “**whoever**” is the subject of the verb “**has**” and introduces the relative clause.

- **Using the relative pronoun “whom” or “whomever”:**

If the relative pronoun functions as the object of a verb or preposition, use “**whom**” or “**whomever**”:

My friend has two children, **whom she loves very much.**

In this sentence, “**whom**” replaces “**children**” as the object of the verb “**loves**” and introduces a nonrestrictive relative clause.

I will support **whomever the committee recommends for the position.**

This sentence includes a restrictive relative clause introduced by the pronoun “**whomever**,” which is the object of the verb “**recommends**.”

- **Using the relative pronoun “whose”:**

If the relative pronoun functions as a means to show possession, use “**whose**.”

She was a distinguished public servant, **whose reputation was impeccable.**

In this sentence, the relative pronoun “**whose**” replaces the pronoun “**she**” to form a nonrestrictive relative clause: i.e., her reputation was impeccable.

## **PUNCTUATING RELATIVE CLAUSES**

Many writers find it difficult to know when and how to use punctuation with relative clauses, so it is important to develop a strategy to guide your understanding.

If a relative clause defines or identifies the noun or pronoun it modifies, punctuation is not required

The woman **who is sitting next to me** wants to ask a question.

In this sentence, the clause “**who is sitting next to me**” identifies a particular woman (the one sitting next to me) and functions as a restrictive relative clause.

If the relative clause adds extra information or facts about the noun or pronoun, then the clause must be set off from the rest of the sentence by commas:

George Washington, **who was the first president of the United States**, is a symbol of honesty, bravery, and patriotism.

In this sentence, “**George Washington**” is a proper noun identified by name, and the relative clause “**who was the first president of the United States**” adds additional information that is not essential to the meaning of the sentence. As a nonrestrictive relative clause, it is set off with commas.

If a relative clause adding extra information comes between a subject and a verb, there must be a comma before and after the clause. In essence, the punctuation indicates that the relative clause could be removed and the basic sentence would remain the same.

## SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT IN RELATIVE CLAUSES

Relative pronouns connect a subordinating or dependent clause to an antecedent noun or pronoun in a sentence. It is important therefore that relative pronouns used as subjects in relative clauses take verbs that agree with their antecedents. In addition, relative clauses contain a subject and verb as well as an object or complement. Subject-verb agreement within the clause is determined by asking whether the antecedent of a subject relative pronoun is singular or plural.

I met a man **who works** for the New York City Housing Authority.

In this sentence, the relative pronoun “**who**” replaces the singular noun “**man**,” so the verb “**works**” agrees with a singular noun and takes an “**-s**” ending.

I have several friends **who work** at the United Nations.

In this sentence, the relative pronoun “**who**” replaces the plural noun “**friends**,” so the verb “**work**” agrees with a plural noun in simple present tense.

## TROUBLESHOOTING

When a relative clause immediately follows the subject of the independent clause, it is placed between the noun or pronoun and the verb of the sentence.

People **who have young children** don’t always have much time for themselves.

My parents, **who live in Minneapolis**, come to visit twice a year.

In your own writing, when the relative clause immediately follows the subject of the sentence, it is easy to forget to finish the independent clause by adding the main verb after using the clause, which can result in a sentence fragment: “My sister who went to school in Albany.” In order to correct the fragment, add a main verb: “My sister, who went to school in Albany, **is** a nurse.” or omit the relative clause: “My sister went to school in Albany.”