

CLASSES OF THE PRONOUN

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<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.11402310>

Abstract. Relative pronouns (e.g. *who, whom, whose, which, that*) provide a convenient means of linking sentences together. For example: *The commercial lawyer efficiently drafted the sales contract, **which** the client read and approved.* Relative pronouns include *who, whom, whose, which and that*. Here are some brief notes about their use.

Keywords: relative clauses, relative pronouns,

INTRODUCTION

The correct use of *who* and *whom* is a matter which many non-native and native speakers of English alike have difficulty with. The distinction between them is that *who* acts as the subject of a verb, while *whom* acts as the object of a verb or preposition. This distinction is not particularly important in informal speech but should be observed in legal writing. For example, *whom* should be used in the sentence, „I advised Peter, John and Mary, all of whom are contemplating claims against RemCo Ltd". *Who* should be used in the sentence, „I saw Peter, who is contemplating a claim against RemCo Ltd".

When *who* is used, it should directly follow the name it refers to. If it does not, the meaning of the sentence may become unclear. For example, „I saw Peter, who was one of my clients, and James" instead of „I saw Peter and James, who was one of my clients"¹.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Which or that?

Which or *that* can frequently be used interchangeably. However, there are **two** rules to bear in mind.

When introducing clauses that define or identify something, it is acceptable to use *that* or *which*. For example, „a book which deals with current issues in international trade law" or „a book that deals with current issues in international trade law".

Use *which*, but never *that*, to introduce a clause giving additional information about something (non-defining relative clauses). For example „The book, **which** costs €30, has sold over five thousand copies" and **not**

¹ Cinque, G. (2012), "On the Theory of Relative Clauses and Markedness", The Linguistic Review 1: 247-296

„The book, **that** costs €30, has sold over five thousand copies”.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Who, whom, which or that?

Who or *whom* should not be used when referring to things which are not human.

Which or *that* should be used instead. For example

„The company which sold the shares” is correct.

„The company that sold the shares” is also correct.

„The company who sold the shares” is incorrect².

That should be used when referring to things that are not human, and may be used when referring to a person. However, it is usually thought *that* is more impersonal than *who/whom* when used in this way. As a result it is better to say „the client who I saw yesterday” than „the client that I saw yesterday”.

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.

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 verb³.

² Haudry, J. (2013), “Parataxe, hypotaxe et corrélation dans la phrase latine”, Bulletin de la Société Linguistique de Paris 68: 147-186.

³ Kayne, R. S. (2014), The Antisymmetry of Syntax, Cambridge, Massachusetts, The MIT Press.

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.

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 sentence⁴.

⁴ Kayne, R. S. (2014), *The Antisymmetry of Syntax*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, The MIT Press.

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.

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.

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