

# USE RELATIVE CLAUSES FOR DESCRIPTION

A relative clause is a subordinate clause that provides additional information about something mentioned in the first part of the sentence.

Relative clauses are introduced by a relative pronoun (*that, which, who...*) or a relative adverb (*where, when...*) and can be *defining* (used without commas) or *non-defining* (set off by commas).

## When to use a relative clause

Use a relative clause when you want to connect two clauses or provide additional information about something without starting a brand new sentence.

*Example:*

The doctor is holding a clipboard. The doctor works in the ER.

→ The doctor who is holding a clipboard works in the ER.

## Defining vs. non-defining relative clauses

There are two types of relative clauses in English: **defining** and **non-defining**.

### Defining relative clauses

Defining relative clauses (also known as *identifying relative clauses, restrictive relative clauses, or integrated relative clauses*):

- provide defining information that is **essential** to the meaning of the sentence
- are **not** set off by commas

*Example:*

The doctor who is holding a clipboard works in the ER.

(without the relative clause, it would be unclear which doctor is meant because there are two doctors in the picture).

### Non-defining relative clauses

Non-defining relative clauses (also known as *non-identifying relative clauses* or *non-restrictive relative clauses*):

- provide **extra** information that is not essential to the meaning of the sentence.
- are always set off by **commas**.

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## Example:

The ER doctor, whose name is Jane, has to work nights, which she doesn't enjoy.  
(the main information is that the ER doctor works nights; the sentence would still convey this without the relative clauses).

## How to form a relative clause

Form relative clauses by placing a relative pronoun (*that, which, who, whom, whose*) directly after the thing being described, followed by the clause.

A relative clause can refer to a subject, object or an entire clause.

## Example:

*The doctor who is wearing a stethoscope is a GP. (subject)*

*The patients that Henry treats have milder issues. (object)*

*Jane often has to work nights, which she doesn't enjoy. (clause)*

## List of relative pronouns

The table below shows the English relative pronouns and how to use them:

Relative pronoun	Use for...	Example
<b>that</b>	people, animals & things (defining relative clauses only)	<i>The patients <u>that</u> have milder issues see the GP.</i>
<b>which</b>	animals, things and entire clauses	<i>Jane has to work nights, <u>which</u> she doesn't enjoy.</i>
<b>who</b>	people	<i>The doctor <u>who</u> is carrying a clipboard works in the ER.</i> <i>Jane, <u>who</u> is an ER doctor, has to work nights.</i>
<b>whose</b>	possession/belonging for people, animals and things	<i>The patients <u>whose</u> injuries are serious go to the ER.</i> <i>The ER doctor, <u>whose</u> name is Jane, has to work nights.</i>
<b>whom</b>	people that are the object of the relative clause (formal contexts only)	<i>The patients <u>whom</u> he treats experience milder issues.</i> <i>My doctor, <u>whom</u> I saw yesterday, is pleased with my recovery thus far.</i>

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## Relative pronouns: quick tips

The quick tips below will help you choose the correct relative pronoun every time:

### *that vs. who*

In **defining** relative clauses (no commas), *that* and *who* are interchangeable when referring to people.

#### *Examples:*

*The doctor who/that is holding a clipboard is an ER doctor.*

*The patients who/that have milder issues see the GP.*

However, in a **non-defining** relative clause (with commas), we can only use *who* for people (not *that*).

#### *Example:*

*Jane, who is an ER doctor, has to work nights.*

*(not: Jane, that is an ER doctor, has to work nights).*

### *that vs. which*

*That* and *which* are interchangeable when they refer to animals and things in **defining** relative clauses (no commas).

#### *Example:*

*The medication that/which this patient needs is currently unavailable.*

However, in non-defining relative clauses (with commas), we may only use *which*, **never that**.

#### *Examples:*

*The medication, which has some *side effects*, can be found at the pharmacy.*

*(not: The medication, that has some side effects, ...)*

Note: some sources claim that *which* should not be used in defining relative clauses, but there is actually no official rule that dictates this.

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## *who vs. whom*

Save *whom* for formal contexts; it is rarely used in everyday English. Use *who* or *that* instead.

### *Example:*

The patients *whom* he treats have milder issues.

→ The patients who/that he treats have milder issues.

## **Relative clauses with prepositions**

Sometimes the verb in the relative clause takes a preposition (e.g., *listen to*, *deal with*, *ask for ...*).

In everyday English, the preposition comes at the **end** of the relative clause:

### *Examples:*

The patient's condition, *which Henry is unfamiliar with*, is very rare.

Over there is the doctor *that I spoke to*.

The patients *that Henry deals with* have milder issues.

However, in formal English, the preposition comes first. Compare:

### *Examples:*

The patient's condition, *with which Henry is unfamiliar*, is very rare.

Over there is the doctor *to whom I spoke*.

The patients *with whom Henry deals* have milder issues.

(remember: *whom* is only for formal contexts).

When the relative clause refers to a time, place, or reason, we place the preposition first in formal contexts. In everyday situations, we prefer to use a relative adverb. You can read more about relative adverbs directly below.

### *Examples:*

The hospital *at which she works* is one of the best.

→ The hospital *where she works* is one of the best. (*relative adverb*)

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## Relative adverbs

We can use relative adverbs (*when, where, why*) to introduce defining and non-defining relative clauses that refer to a time, place or reason. Relative adverbs replace the structure *preposition + relative pronoun* (e.g. *at which, on which ...*).

### *Example:*

The hospital *at which* she works is one of the best.

→ The hospital where she works is one of the best.

(relative adverb *where* replaces *at which*).

## List of relative adverbs

As you can see from the table below, the relative adverbs look the same as question words:

Relative adverb	Use for...	Example
<b>when</b>	a time (= in/on which)	Friday is the day <i>on which</i> Henry does all his paperwork. → Friday is the day <u>when</u> Henry does all his paperwork.
<b>where</b>	a place (= in/at which)	The hospital <i>at which</i> she works is one of the best. → The hospital <u>where</u> she works is one of the best.
<b>why</b>	a reason (= for which)	The reason <i>for which</i> they are at the hospital is often very serious. → The reason <u>why</u> they are at the hospital is often very serious.

## What is a contact clause?

A contact clause is when we leave out the relative pronoun *that, which* or *who* in a **defining** relative clause that refers to the **object** of a sentence.

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*Examples:*

*The medication ~~that~~ which he takes has some side effects.*

*(the medication = object of the verb take).*

*The doctor ~~who~~ that I spoke to was very friendly.*

*(the doctor = object of the verb speak).*

But be careful! We cannot leave out the relative pronoun when it:

- refers to the **subject** of the sentence

*Example:*

*The doctor who/that treated my injury was much friendlier than the other doctor.*

*(not: The doctor treated my injury was much friendlier than the other doctor).*

- is part of a **non-defining** relative clause (regardless whether it follows the subject or the object)

*Examples:*

*The GP is treating a new patient, who has the sniffles.*

*(not: The GP is treating a new patient, has the sniffles).*

*The GP, who has had a busy day, is treating a new patient.*

*(not: The GP, has had a busy day, is treating a new patient).*

## **Subject or object?**

Not sure how to figure out if the relative clause refers to a subject or an object? Here's how:

- relative pronoun + verb = subject

*Example:*

*This is the patient that had a serious injury.*

*(that + verb (had) = the patient is the subject of the relative clause).*

- relative pronoun + article/noun/pronoun = object

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*Example:*

This is the patient *(that)* the doctor treated.

*(that + noun (the doctor) = the patient is the object of the relative clause).*

- **exception:** *whose* is followed by a noun, but is **always** the subject of the relative clause

*Example:*

The GP works office hours. *His* name is Henry.

→ The GP, *whose* name is Henry, works office hours.

*(his name becomes whose in the relative clause).*

**Reference:**

*Redaction from Lingolia English. (s.f.) Relative clauses & relative pronouns. Lingolia English.*

*Recovered from: <https://english.lingolia.com/en/grammar/sentences/relative-clauses>*