

IN THE SERVICE OF GOOD WRITING

It's All Relative (Clauses)

Laurie Endicott Thomas, MA, ELS / Independent Medical Writer, Madison, NJ

ABSTRACT

Are you baffled by when to use *which* and when to use *that*? When is it okay to drop *that*? When should you say *who* (vs *whom*), and when should you say *whoever* (vs *whomever*)? This article explains the grammar and usage of relative clauses and noun clauses. Like other clauses, a relative clause has its own subject and predicate. However, the relative clause serves as an adjective, modifying a noun in some other clause. The relative clause is linked to its referent by a relative pronoun (eg, *that*, *who/whom*, *which*, or *whose*). Similarly, an adverb clause can be introduced by a relative adverb (eg, *when*, *where*, *why*). The words that serve as relative pronouns and relative adverbs can also serve as complementizers. A complementizer is a word that creates a noun clause that serves as a subject or object in some other clause. Knowing these principles can help you untangle long, complicated sentences. Thus, you can make your text more readable. A sentence diagramming app can help you visualize and understand the syntactical relationships.

The purpose of this article is to help you learn some tips and tricks for combining little sentences to make a bigger sentence, and for breaking up long, complicated sentences into bite-sized pieces. In particular, it explains how a relative pronoun can be used to turn a simple sentence into a relative clause (adjectival clause) that modifies a noun in some other clause and how relative adverbs introduce adverbial clauses. It also explains how you can turn a simple sentence into a noun clause that can serve as a subject or object in some other sentence. It will also give you some tips on how to make sure that your adjective clauses say what you want them to say.

WHAT ARE CLAUSES?

Consider these 2 simple sentences.

- Sarah speaks 5 languages. Sarah works as a translator.

A simple sentence consists of a single independent

clause. A clause is a word string that consists of a subject and a predicate. If a clause can stand on its own as a complete sentence, it is independent. Every complete sentence contains at least one independent clause. Two independent clauses can be conjoined to form a compound sentence. There are 3 common ways to conjoin 2 independent clauses: a semicolon, a colon, or a comma and a coordinating conjunction.

- Sarah speaks 5 languages; she works as a translator.
- Sarah works as a translator: she speaks 5 languages.
- Sarah speaks 5 languages, and she works as a translator.

Because both independent clauses have the same subject (Sarah), you could use the coordinating conjunction *and* to combine the 2 predicates into a compound predicate:

- Sarah speaks 5 languages *and* works as a translator.

You can also use a subordinating conjunction to turn one of those independent clauses into a dependent clause. The result is a complex sentence. A complex sentence contains at least one dependent (subordinate) clause in addition to an independent clause. In the following example, a subordinating conjunction (*because*) was used to create a subordinate clause that acts as an adverb:

- Sarah works as a translator *because* she speaks 5 languages.

Adverbial clauses express a time, a place, a reason, or a condition for action described in the main clause.

WHAT ARE RELATIVE CLAUSES?

You could also create a complex sentence by turning one of those independent clauses into a relative clause that is embedded in the other sentence. To do that, replace the subject of one of those sentences with the relative pronoun *who*. A relative pronoun is a pronoun that serves as the head of an adjectival clause that modifies a noun in some other clause. (The head of a phrase or clause is the word that

determines the grammatical category to which that phrase or clause belongs. The head is not always the first word in that phrase or clause.) The *who* clause is a dependent clause because it cannot stand on its own as a complete sentence. It is a relative clause because it relates to one of the nouns in another clause:

- Sarah, *who* speaks 5 languages, works as a translator.
- Sarah, *who* works as a translator, speaks 5 languages.

Knowing these grammatical tricks gives you flexibility. This knowledge enables you to combine small, choppy sentences into a larger but smoother sentence. It also enables you to break down a long, complicated sentence into shorter, simpler sentences that are easier to read. By decreasing sentence length, you improve your text's readability score, thus improving its ranking in search engine results.¹

WHAT ARE RELATIVE PRONOUNS, ADJECTIVES, AND ADVERBS?

Interrogative pronouns (*what*, *which*, *who/whom*) and the interrogative adjective *whose* (which is also a possessive adjective) are used for asking questions. Similarly, *that*, *which*, *who/whom*, and *whose* can be used as relative pronouns:

- **That:** used to refer to people, animals, or things as the subject or object of the relative clause.
- **Who:** used to refer to one or more persons as the subject or a predicate complement of the relative clause.
- **Whom:** used to refer to one or more persons as a direct or indirect object or the object of a preposition in the relative clause.
- **Which:** can be used as a relative pronoun or relative adjective, to refer to or modify animals or things as the subject or object of the relative clause; note that *which* can also be the object of a preposition (eg, *for which* or *at which*)
- **Whose:** is a possessive relative pronoun, sometimes classified as a relative adjective.

I prefer to use *who/whom*, as opposed to *that* or *which*, for clauses that refer to human beings. Note that *whose* can have an inanimate referent:

- Nothing is more powerful than an idea *whose* time has come.

A relative clause can also be headed by a relative adverb (*where*, *when*, or *why*).

BOUND (ADJECTIVAL) CLAUSES

The words that are commonly used as relative pronouns can serve as the head of 2 different types of clauses: bound and

free. The bound ones are the adjectival clauses that modify a particular noun in another clause. As you will see below, the free clauses can stand in for nouns (subjects or objects) in another clause.

Here's a sentence that contains a bound (adjectival) clause:

- They killed the goose that *laid the golden eggs*.

They killed the goose is an independent clause. It can stand on its own as a sentence. In contrast, *that laid the golden eggs* is a clause but not a complete sentence. It does contain a subject (*that*) and a predicate (*laid the golden eggs*). Therefore, it is a clause. However, the clause's subject is a relative pronoun that links the clause to the word *goose*, which is the direct object in the main clause.

Figure 1 is a diagram that I created with the Sentence Diagrammer app. (I added the labels and boxes.) The diagram shows the conjunctive role of the relative pronoun and the adjectival nature of the relative clause. Note the dotted diagonal line that runs from *goose* to *that*. The line is dotted to show that the relative pronoun (*that*) serves as a conjunction. The line starts off as diagonal (parallel to the solid line for an ordinary adjective) to show that the relative clause is a modifier. Because it is modifying a noun, it is adjectival.

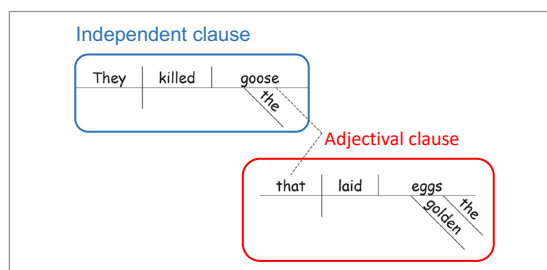


Figure 1. Diagram of a sentence with an adjectival clause.

The referent of a relative clause is normally a particular noun in some other clause. However, English speakers often use a relative clause to refer to a whole sentence or to more than one sentence. In that situation, *which* is always used as the relative pronoun:

- I don't have to work tomorrow, *which* is great because the weather forecast is good.

In English, adjectives normally go directly *in front of* the noun they modify. In contrast, adjectival phrases and clauses normally go directly *after* the noun that they modify. You may have to make some adjustments to put the adjectival phrase directly after the noun. Sometimes, you can do this by replacing a prepositional phrase with an attributive noun:

- A clause is a *string of words* that consists of a subject and a predicate.

😊 A clause is a *word string* that consists of a subject and a predicate.

If you have more than one relative clause modifying the same noun, use a coordinating conjunction to connect them. You could drop the *that* to give the relative clause a compound predicate, but I prefer to repeat the relative pronoun to make the sentence easier to parse.

- Testosterone is a hormone *that is made mainly in the testes* but *that is also made by the adrenal glands*.

RESTRICTIVE VERSUS NONRESTRICTIVE RELATIVE CLAUSES

Relative clauses can be restrictive (defining) or nonrestrictive (modifying). The difference is important because it affects meaning. A restrictive clause is used to define what you are talking about: to specify that you are talking about only a subset of the set that the noun represents. For example, consider the following sentence:

- The vaccine covers the pneumococcal strains *that cause invasive disease*.

This sentence is talking about only a subset of pneumococcal strains. It tells us nothing about the strains that don't cause invasive disease. Are they covered by the vaccine? Maybe, but maybe not. If you want to specify that the vaccine covers *only* the invasive strains, add the word *only*:

- The vaccine covers *only* the pneumococcal strains *that cause invasive disease*.

You might also want to stress that the vaccine provides full coverage:

- The vaccine covers *all* the pneumococcal strains *that cause invasive disease*.

In contrast, a nonrestrictive (modifying) clause is parenthetical: it adds nonessential information. You could delete the nonrestrictive clause without changing the scope of what the sentence is talking about.

- The pancreas secretes insulin, *which plays a key role in controlling blood sugar*.

The *which* clause tells you something about insulin, but it doesn't limit the discussion to a subset of insulins. Because nonrestrictive clauses are parenthetical, they are set off from the rest of the sentence by commas, parentheses, or dashes.

For an illustration of the difference between nonrestrictive and restrictive relative clauses, see Figure 2.

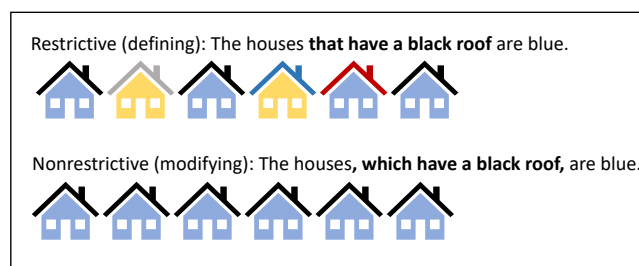


Figure 2. Restrictive and nonrestrictive clauses. The restrictive relative clause *that have a black roof* limits the scope of the discussion so that the sentence is talking only about the houses with a black roof. In the top row, all of the houses that have a black roof are blue. There is also a blue house that doesn't have a black roof. However, the sentence says nothing about it because the sentence is restricted to talking about houses with a black roof. In contrast, the nonrestrictive relative clause "*which have a black roof*," doesn't limit the scope of the discussion to a subset of houses. Rather, it just tells you something about all of the houses. All of the houses in the bottom row are blue, and each has a black roof. So, you could simply say, "The houses are blue" without mentioning the roofs.

When you are writing, you presumably know whether you intend a clause to be restrictive or nonrestrictive. If it is nonrestrictive, set it off with commas, parentheses, or dashes, for clarity. If it is restrictive, don't set it off with those punctuation marks (Table 1). If you are editing someone else's writing, you may have to guess from context whether a relative clause is intended to be restrictive or nonrestrictive. If you are in any doubt, query the author.

Table 1. Restrictive and Nonrestrictive Relative Pronouns

	Referring to Human Beings	Referring to Something Nonhuman	Possessive (Human or Not)
Restrictive	who, whom, that ^a	which, ^b that	whose
Nonrestrictive ^c (with commas)	who, whom	which	whose

^a It's better to use *who* or *whom* instead of *that* when the relative clause is describing a person or group of persons.

^b You could use *which* in a restrictive sense, as long as you don't set it off with punctuation. But it is better to reserve the use of *which* for nonrestrictive relative clauses.

^c Nonrestrictive relative clauses are set off with commas, parentheses, or dashes.

UNBOUND (NOUN) CLAUSES

As you have seen, relative clauses serve as adjectives, modifying the noun to which they are bound. However, there are some clauses that look like relative clauses but do not modify anything external to themselves. Instead, they are noun clauses embedded in another clause. The word responsible for turning the word string into a noun clause is called a complementizer. The words that commonly serve as relative pronouns (*who/whom, which, that*) can also serve as complementizers. So can the compound relative pronouns (*whoever, whichever*), the interrogative pronouns and adjectives (*who/whom, what, which, whose*), some subor-

inating conjunctions (eg, *if, whether*), the relative adverbs (*how, when why*), and a preposition plus a relative pronoun (eg, *for whom*). A noun clause can serve as a subject, object, or predicate complement within some other clause:

- *Whom you know* [subject] is as important as *what you know* [object of a preposition].
- I will see *what I need* [direct object].
- This is *what I need* [predicate complement].

The Reed-Kellogg system of diagramming sentences uses a pedestal (a long vertical line with a triangular base) to insert the noun clause into the host clause (Figure 3).

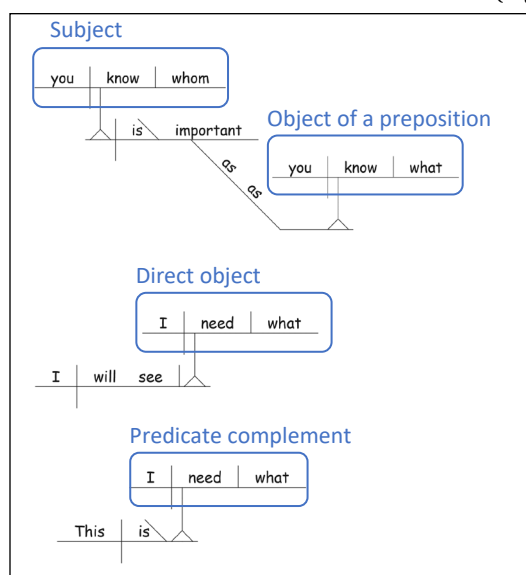


Figure 3. Examples of complementizers. The words that normally serve as relative pronouns (*who/whom, which that*) can also serve as complementizers. A complementizer is a word that is turning a word string into a noun clause that is a subject, a predicate complement, or an object within another clause. The compound relative pronouns (*whichever, whoever*) and interrogative pronouns and adjectives (eg, *how, when, where, whose*) can also serve as complementizers, as can some subordinating conjunctions. In Reed-Kellogg sentence diagrams, noun clauses are put up on pedestals (a vertical line with a triangular base).

WHO OR WHOM?

Many people get confused about when to say *who* and when to say *whom*. They have the same trouble with *I* and *me*. This confusion results from the fact that English speakers have stopped marking nouns for case. Case refers to the role that a noun or pronoun is playing in a sentence. In English, there are only 2 cases:

- The nominative case (*I, we, you, he, she, they, who, whoever*) is used for the subject of a clause or for its predicate complement (Figure 4).
- The objective case (*me, us, him, her them, whom, whomever*) is used for direct and indirect objects and the objects of prepositions (Figure 5).

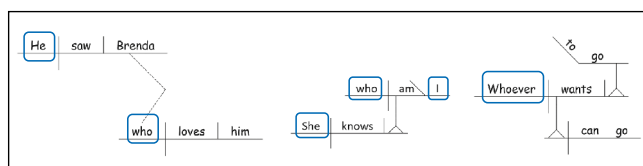


Figure 4. Nominative case. If a pronoun is the subject of a clause, use the nominative case (*I, we, you, he, she, they, who, whoever*). Also use the nominative case for predicate complements (pronouns linked to the subject by a linking verb [copula], such as *to be [am, is, are, was, were, etc]*). The diagonal line after the word *am* indicates that *am* is a linking verb.

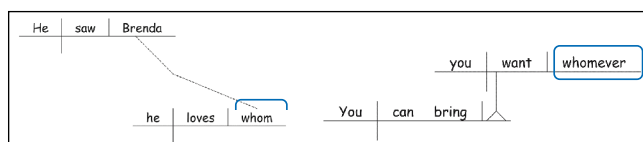


Figure 5. Objective case. If a pronoun is an object (direct or indirect object or the object of a preposition), use the objective case (*me, us, you, him, her, them, whom, whomever*).

When in doubt, diagram the sentence. Sentence diagramming apps can help you visualize the sentence structure, but they might not correct your grammar. If the pronoun is the subject of a clause (ie, it falls before the line that separates subject from predicate), use the nominative case. If the pronoun falls after that line, use the objective case unless the verb in the predicate is a linking verb (indicated by a slash after the verb).

REDUCED RELATIVE CLAUSES

A reduced relative clause is a relative clause that is not marked by an explicit relative pronoun. English speakers often drop the relative pronoun. For example, Ira Gershwin's lyrics in the song *The Man I Love* are about "the man [whom] I love." If you drop a relative pronoun and its finite verb (eg, *that is* or *that were*), you may transform the relative clause into a participial phrase. By dropping those words, you can decrease your word count. Yet as I explained in an earlier installment of this column,² that practice can lead to garden path effects. A garden path sentence is grammatically correct and unambiguous, but it initially lures one into a false interpretation, which is irritating.

- The horse raced past the barn fell. (The horse that was raced past the barn fell.)

CONCLUSION

Some of the problems posed by relative pronouns involve meaning, and some just involve grammar. These are the points that involve meaning:

- When you spot a relative pronoun (eg, *that, which, who, whoever, whom, whomever, whose*), ask yourself whether it is the head of an adjectival clause (relative clause) or a noun clause. If it is the head of an adjectival

clause, figure out what noun the clause is modifying. Try to position the clause directly after that noun to clarify the meaning.

- Set nonrestrictive relative clauses off with commas, parentheses, or dashes. Do not set off restrictive relative clauses with punctuation. If you are editing someone else's work and have any doubt about whether a relative clause is restrictive or nonrestrictive, query the author.
- In restrictive relative clauses that modify something nonhuman, use *that* instead of *which*, to emphasize the restriction.
- To avoid dehumanizing language, use *who/whom* instead of *that* or *which* when the relative clause refers to one or more human beings.

Once you learn how to diagram sentences, some baffling grammatical rules start to make more sense.

- When in doubt about whether to use *who* vs *whom* (or *whoever* vs *whomever*), diagram the sentence. If a pronoun is the subject of a clause or the predicate complement of a subject, use the nominative case (*who/whoever*). Otherwise, use the objective case (*whom/whomever*).

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Author contact: *Lthomas521@verizon.net.*

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