

Grammar Practice: Relative Clauses

What are relative clauses?

Relative clauses are the connectors—*that*, *who*, *which*, *when*, *whose*, and *where*—that we use to define the noun that comes before the clause.

The woman who lives next door is a doctor.
who lives next door tells us which woman

We use **who** in a relative clause when we are talking about people (not things). We use *who* instead of *he/she/they*:

We know a lot of people. They live in London.
↓
We know a lot of people **who** live in London.

We use **that** or **which** when we talk about things (not people) in a relative clause:

Where is the cheese? It was in the refrigerator.
↓
Where is the cheese **that** was in the refrigerator?

When should I use commas?

Relative clauses are divided into two categories: defining and non-defining.

Non-defining relative clauses present “extra” information that could be omitted. Commas can be used around non-defining relative clauses.

- ✓ The academy, where we play tennis, is next to my house.
- ✓ The academy ~~, where we play tennis,~~ is next to my house.

The main intended meaning is that *the academy is next to my house*. The fact that *we play tennis at the academy* is extra information; if the relative clause *where we play tennis* were omitted, the full intended meaning would remain. Therefore, commas are placed around the non-defining relative clause.

In **defining** relative clauses, you cannot omit information from the sentence without changing the intended meaning. Commas cannot be used around defining relative clauses.

- ✓ People who play the piano are often good at typing.
 - ✗ People, who play the piano, are often good at typing.
 - ✗ People ~~who play the piano~~ are often good at typing.

All of the information in this sentence is needed to communicate the full meaning. The relative clause *who play the piano* cannot be omitted; therefore, no commas are used.

Defining Clauses without Commas

✓ The students who finished their homework left the classroom.

Without commas, this means that **only** the students who finished their homework left the classroom. The information *who finished their homework* defines which students left the classroom.

Non-Defining Clauses with Commas

✓ The students, who finished their homework, left the classroom.

The use of commas indicates that *who finished their homework* is extra information. If it is omitted, the sentence reads *The students left the classroom*. The commas tell us that **all** the students left the classroom.

When should I use *that*?

With **defining relative clauses**, it is acceptable (and common) to substitute the connectors *who* and *which* with the connector *that*.

the man who walks my dog...



the man that walks my dogs...

the car which I drive...



the car that I drive...

With **non-defining relative clauses**, you must use *who* for a person and *which* for a thing. *That* is not acceptable.

✓ Bicycling to school, which is healthy, is becoming more and more common.

✗ Bicycling to school, that is healthy, is becoming more and more common.

✓ Sister Bernadette, who was a nun, starred in the movie.

✗ Sister Bernadette, which was a nun, starred in the movie.

When can I omit the connector?

It is acceptable (and very common) to omit the relative clause connector—*that*, *who*, *which*, *when*, *whose*, or *where*—when the connector is the object of the sentence. Objects not only define the preceding noun but also “receive action” from the preceding verb.

The woman who I wanted to see was away on vacation.

I wanted to see the woman.

I is the subject; see is the verb; *the woman* is the object.

the woman is the recipient of the action *to see* because it is who I wanted to see.

When relative clauses are objects, the connector can be omitted.

- ✓ The woman who I wanted to see was away on vacation.
- ✓ The woman I wanted to see was away on vacation.

- ✓ Is there anything that I can do?
- ✓ Is there anything I can do?

However, you must use the connector when it is the subject of the relative clause.

- ✓ The woman who lives next door is a doctor.
 - ✗ The woman lives next door is a doctor

- ✓ Where is the cheese that was in the fridge?
 - ✗ Where is the cheese was in the fridge?

Practice

Make one sentence from two sentences using relative clauses. If the connector can be omitted, put it in parentheses. If the clause is non-defining, use commas.

1. A girl was injured in the accident. She is now in the hospital.
The girl who was injured in the accident is now in the hospital.
2. We wanted to visit the museum. It was closed when we got there.
The museum (that) we wanted to visit was closed when we got there.
3. A man answered the phone. He told me you were away.
4. My house is for sale. I have lived in my house for five years.
5. A waitress served us. She was polite and patient.
6. I invited people to the party. Some of the people couldn't come.
7. You were looking for keys. Are these the keys?
8. A bus goes to the airport. It runs every half hour.

9. This webpage was written in 2017. It has exercises at the bottom.
10. Barbara works for a company. The company makes washing machines.
11. I talked to people. They were very friendly.
12. The sun is hot. It warms our planet.
13. What was the name of the horse? It won the race.
14. Mohammed is on vacation. He is responsible for hiring.
15. What happened to the pictures? They were on the wall.
16. I applied for the job. I didn't get the job.
17. He was born in Germany. Germany is in Europe.

Explain the meaning of each sentence:

1. The prisoners who were fighting will be punished. (*All of them or only some of them?*)
2. The prisoners, who were fighting, will be punished. (*All of them or only some of them?*)
3. She took the bicycle that was on the side of the house. (*was there more than one bicycle?*)
4. She took the bicycle, which was on the side of the house. (*was there more than one bicycle?*)