



FREE RESOURCE · GRAMMAR

# Relative clauses

A relative clause is a part of a sentence that gives more information about a noun, starting with who, which, that, whose, where or when. Use who for people, which for things, that for either in a defining clause, whose for possession and where for places. Non-defining clauses need commas.

## What to know

### What a relative clause does

A relative clause tells us which person or thing you mean, or adds extra information about them. It joins two ideas in one sentence, so your writing sounds more advanced and less choppy.

- *The man who lives next door is a doctor.* · *who for a person*
- *The report, which was published in March, shows rising costs.* · *extra information*

### Choosing the relative word

The word you choose depends on what it refers to.

- **who:** people. The teacher who helped me was very patient.
- **which:** things and animals. The laptop which I bought has a good battery.
- **that:** people or things, in defining clauses only. The book that I read was long.
- **whose:** possession, for people and things. She is a scientist whose research focuses on water.
- **where:** places. This is the town where I grew up.

### Defining and non-defining clauses

A **defining** clause is essential. Without it, we do not know which person or thing you mean. There are no commas: Students who revise regularly perform better. This means only the students who revise, not all students.

### Leaving out the relative word

In defining clauses, you can leave out who, which or that when it is the **object** of the clause, that is, when another subject follows it. The book I read was long. The people we met were friendly.

### Relative clauses with prepositions

In speech, the preposition usually goes at the end of the clause: The city I live in is crowded. In formal writing, you can move it before the pronoun and use which or whom: The city in which I live is crowded.

## Exercises

1. The student \_\_\_\_\_ won the prize studies engineering.
  - a. which
  - b. who
  - c. whose

2. The laptop \_\_\_\_\_ I bought last year has stopped working.  
a. which  
b. who  
c. where
3. She is a teacher \_\_\_\_\_ classes are always full.  
a. which  
b. whose  
c. who
4. That is the town \_\_\_\_\_ I grew up.  
a. which  
b. who  
c. where
5. Many cities now charge cars to enter the centre, \_\_\_\_\_ has reduced traffic.  
a. what  
b. that  
c. which
6. Find the mistake and write the right form: (1) The book (2) that I read it (3) was very (4) interesting.
7. Find the mistake and write the right form: (1) People (2) who they live (3) in big cities (4) often use public transport.
8. Put the words in order (one or more words are not needed): is / from / me / Scotland. / woman / who / which / The / teaches
9. Correct this: *Everything what she said was true.*
10. Correct this: *The man who he lives next door is a doctor.*

**Practise online, free:** hear every example and check your answers at [www.ielts-laboratory.co/free-resources/relative-clauses/practice/](http://www.ielts-laboratory.co/free-resources/relative-clauses/practice/)

**IELTS tip.** Relative clauses are one of the clearest ways to show grammatical range in Writing Task 2. Aim for two or three accurate ones, such as people who work from home or a policy which has reduced traffic. Check the commas and make sure you do not repeat the subject.

**FOR TEACHERS · GRAMMAR**

# Relative clauses

|                  |                                                                                                                                  |
|------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>AIM</b>       | Learners build accurate defining and non-defining relative clauses and use them to combine ideas in speaking and Task 2 writing. |
| <b>TIME</b>      | 30 minutes                                                                                                                       |
| <b>LEVEL</b>     | B1 to B2 (IELTS 5 to 6.5)                                                                                                        |
| <b>MATERIALS</b> | This worksheet, one copy per learner; the free online practice for the audio                                                     |

## Warm-up

Play a guessing game. A learner describes a classmate or an object using only a relative clause (It is a thing which you use to...) and the others guess.

## Lesson steps

1. Show two short sentences about a person and combine them with **who**. Repeat for a thing, a place and a possession.
2. Contrast defining and non-defining sentences on the board and ask what changes in meaning when commas are added.
3. Teach omission with a quick test: can you remove the relative word and still have a correct sentence?
4. Learners combine ten pairs of sentences about their cities, studies or jobs into single sentences.
5. Introduce '**which**' for a whole idea and have learners add a result clause to three Task 2 sentences.

## Extension

Learners find five relative clauses in a Reading passage, label them defining or non-defining, and explain the commas.

## Answer key

1. b) **who**. Who refers to a person and is the subject of won.
2. a) **which**. Which refers to a thing. Who is for people and where is for places.
3. b) **whose**. Whose shows possession: her classes.
4. c) **where**. Where refers to a place and replaces in it.
5. c) **which**. After a comma, use which to refer to the whole idea. That cannot follow a comma and what is not a relative word.
6. Part 2: *that I read it* → **that I read**. Do not repeat the object. That already stands for the book, so drop it.
7. Part 2: *who they live* → **who live**. Who is the subject of live, so you do not need the pronoun they.
8. The woman who teaches me is from Scotland. Who joins the clause to a person, and the clause comes straight after the noun.

9. Everything that she said was true. What is not used as a relative word after everything. Use that, or leave it out.
10. The man who lives next door is a doctor. Who is already the subject of lives. Do not add he.

## Questions learners often ask

**What is a relative clause?** It is a part of a sentence that describes a noun and begins with a word such as who, which, that, whose or where. It tells us which person or thing, or adds more information.

**What is the difference between defining and non-defining clauses?** A defining clause is needed to know which person or thing is meant, and has no commas. A non-defining clause only adds extra information, has commas and cannot use that.

**When can I leave out who, which or that?** You can leave it out when it is the object of the clause, meaning another subject follows it: the book I read. You cannot leave it out when it is the subject.

**Should I use who or that for people?** Both are common in defining clauses, but who is more natural and slightly more formal for people. In non-defining clauses you must use who.

## Sources

- Swan, M. (2016). Practical English Usage, 4th edition. Oxford University Press.
- Carter, R. and McCarthy, M. (2006). Cambridge Grammar of English. Cambridge University Press.

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