

Relative Clauses

A relative clause is a type of dependent clause. A clause is a word group that contains a subject-verb pair. It may be independent (able to stand alone as a complete sentence) or dependent (unable to stand alone; it needs to be joined to a complete sentence). Click here for more on [dependent and independent clauses](#).

Relative pronouns

A relative clause begins with a relative pronoun such as *that*, *which*, or *who*. To represent objects, use *which* (for [non-essential clauses](#)) or *that* (for [essential clauses](#)). To represent people, use *that* or *who*, *whom*, *whoever*, *whomever*, and *whose*.

The relative pronoun usually immediately follows the noun it represents, often (but not always) making it the subject of the relative clause:


The class that has a waitlist is the prerequisite to this one.

Although the relative pronoun is usually the subject of the relative clause, the verb of the relative clause must match the preceding noun (the one that the relative pronoun refers to). In other words, *which*, *that*, and *who* do not themselves tell you what verb to use. You have to look farther back in the sentence:


The office, which needs to be painted, is located downtown [office...needs].
The offices, which need to be painted, are located downtown [offices...need].


The class that has a waitlist is the prerequisite to this one [class...has].
The classes that have a waitlist are very popular [classes...have].


The boy who mows my lawn is in seventh grade [boy...mows].
The boys who mow my lawn are in seventh grade [boys...mow].

Essential (defining or restrictive) clauses

In the example above, the relative clause defines, or restricts, the meaning of *class* to a specific class—the one with the waitlist. When a relative clause is used intentionally to restrict the meaning of a word in this way, it is called an *essential clause*. No commas separate these clauses because the words are intended to be read together: *class that has a waitlist*.

That always introduces an essential clause. (*Which* is usually used for non-essential clauses, below.) *Who*, *whose*, and *whom* may also introduce essential clauses, as in the following examples:

The kids who sign up first will get in the program.
The kids whose parents sign them up first will get in the program.
The kids whom I babysit are going to summer camp (formal).
The kids who I babysit are going to summer camp (informal).
The class that has a waitlist is the prerequisite to this one

Non-essential (non-defining or unrestrictive) clauses

A non-essential clause adds information to the sentence but does not specifically define or restrict the meaning. Because it is grammatically non-essential information, it is set off by commas. The following examples say something very similar to the last two examples above:

Those kids, who I babysit, are going to summer camp.
That class, which has a waitlist, is the one I need.
Those kids, whose parents work for CalTrans, are going to summer camp.

However, in these examples the writer is treating *who I babysit*, *which has a waitlist*, and *whose parents work for CalTrans* as incidental, non-essential add-ons. Therefore, these clauses are *non-essential*. *Which* is usually reserved for non-essential clause and as such is set off by a comma.

Elliptical clauses

It is common (and OK) to omit the word *that* and *who* from some essential relative clauses, as in the following examples:

The class [that] I took last year was the prerequisite.
The kids [who/whom] I babysit are going to summer camp.

These are called elliptical clauses. (The name comes from the word *ellipses*, which are the three dots that indicate an omission in a quoted text. In this case, the omission is the relative pronoun.)

Noun clauses

Relative clauses that answer the question “*What?*” or “*Who?*” are noun clauses, just as words that answer the question “*What?*” or “*Who?*” are nouns. Noun clauses can sometimes be subjects of sentences, as in the following example.

Whoever calls in first wins the tickets

Adjective clauses

Relative clauses that describe nouns are adjective clauses, just as words that describe nouns are adjectives:


The applicants whose forms were incomplete did not get interviews.


The job, which was advertised online, attracted 500 applicants.


Those who arrived early got coffee.


The tickets that I bought were for section B.

Contributed by Rosemary McKeever



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