



The Writing Center

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Relative Clauses

The English language provides its users an abundance of choices when it comes to adding additional information to a sentence. The two primary parts of speech present in every sentence are verbs and nouns. To add information to a sentence, we can modify verbs with adverbials or nouns with adjectivals. There are many forms of adverbials and adjectivals, but one particular form of adjectivals, the relative clause, provides considerable versatility and effectiveness, but also a fair amount of challenge. A working understanding of relative clauses can give you a formidable amount of power and mobility as a writer.

Relative clauses modify *things* (nouns). That is, they are clauses (sentence units with subjects and predicates) relative to nouns. The information they provide can be either restrictive (necessary for understanding the sentence) or nonrestrictive (unnecessary, additional information).

In order to understand relative clauses, we must first understand relative pronouns – words always present in relative clauses. There are five relative pronouns: *that*, *which*, *who*, *whom*, and *whose*. The appropriate pronoun used depends on two characteristics of the noun the clause is relative to: whether or not we need additional information to identify the noun (is the clause restrictive or nonrestrictive?) and the variety of noun (person, place, or thing?).

1. Restrictive Clauses:

- Consider the following ninjas:
 - ninja #1
 - ninja holding sandwich
 - ninja on a boat
- Consider the following sentence *without* a relative clause:
 - The ninja enjoys mountain climbing.

It is impossible to tell, given the information present, which ninja enjoys mountain climbing. We need more information. We need to identify another characteristic of the ninja that enjoys mountain climbing in order to identify him among his peers.

- Consider the following sentence *with* a relative clause:
 - The ninja who stole my lunch enjoys mountain climbing.

With the additional information, the sentence makes sense: we know which ninja enjoys mountain climbing. Because the sentence without the relative clause is meaningless within the context it is presented, the relative clause (*that stole my lunch*) is restrictive.

Restrictive clauses have two important characteristics:

- They receive no commas. This follows the rule that necessary parts of sentences never receive commas.
- They can include the relative pronouns “that,” “who,” “whom,” or “whose,” but never “which”.

2. Nonrestrictive Clauses:

- Consider the following ninja:
 - Ninja holding sandwich
- Consider the following sentence *without* a relative clause:
 - The ninja enjoys mountain climbing.

This time, the sentence makes sense. There is only one ninja the sentence can refer to, so there is no confusion. However, we can still add information regarding the sandwich he is holding.

- Consider the following sentence *with* a relative clause:
 - The ninja, who stole my lunch, enjoys mountain climbing.

Both sentences referring to the single ninja make sense. Therefore, the relative clause included in the second sentence provides additional, unnecessary information. It is nonrestrictive.

- Nonrestrictive clauses have two important characteristics:
 - They receive commas.
 - They can include the relative pronouns “which,” “who,” “whom,” or “whose,” but never “that.”

3. That or Which:

- As shown above, the relative pronoun “that” is only used with restrictive clauses. Because restrictive clauses never receive commas, if the clause includes a “that,” it should not include commas.
- The relative pronoun “which” is always nonrestrictive. Nonrestrictive clauses get commas. Therefore, so do clauses including a “which.”

4. Exception:

- Only “which” can serve as the object of a preposition. Therefore, if a relative clause’s pronoun is the object of a preposition, and that clause is restrictive, a situation arises where “which” is used without commas.
- Consider the following sentence as it relates to the three ninjas under “Restrictive Clauses” above:
 - The ninja about which I warned you stole my lunch.