

Relative pronouns: non-defining relative clauses

Introduction



These snacks, **which** are so easy to make, are absolutely delicious.

Non-defining relative clauses

We sometimes use a relative clause in order to add a little extra, unnecessary information.

In these kinds of sentences, the clause is often in the middle of a sentence, with a comma before and after it.

My manager, **who** prefers bigger teams, wants to recruit more staff.

Our most recent project, **which** took two years to complete, was very successful.

If we remove the relative clause, the meaning of the sentence remains clear - we know which manager and project we are talking about:

My manager wants to recruit more staff.

Our most recent project was very successful.

So, there is a difference between these two sentences:

1. My sister, **who** lives in Paris, is an architect.
2. My sister **who** lives in Paris is an architect.

In sentence number 1. we know which sister we are talking about - maybe there is only one sister or it is already clear which one we are referring to. We could just say:

My sister is an architect.

In sentence number 2. the speaker has more than one sister and uses a defining relative clause to tell us which one is an architect. It is the one who lives in Paris.

As well as putting the clause in the middle of a sentence between two commas, we can also put it at the end of a sentence:

Our most recent project was successful, **which made us all very happy.**

She went on holiday to Italy, **where her son lives.**

Remember that in non-defining relative clauses, we cannot use **that**. We have to use **who** or **which**. Compare a non-defining and defining relative clause:

He cooked a meal for us last night, **which** was unusual. [He doesn't usually cook.]

He cooked a meal for us last night **which/that** was unusual. [The meal was unusual.]

This can be confusing because you might think you are hearing **two separate sentences** instead of a relative clause. We can, in fact, have two separate sentences but with 'that' as a demonstrative pronoun:

He cooked a meal for us last night. **That** was unusual. [He doesn't usually cook.]

Note that

1. in non-defining relative clauses, we cannot use **that**. We have to use **who** or **which**.

My sister, **who** lives in Paris, is an architect. ✓

My sister, **that** lives in Paris, is an architect. ✗

My sister **who/that** lives in Paris is an architect. ✓

2. it is never possible to omit **which** and **who** in non-defining relative clauses:

My daughters, **who** are both students, live at home with me. ✓

My daughters, **who** are both students, live at home with me. ✗

The meeting, **which** was on Monday, wasn't very productive. ✓

The meeting, **which** was on Monday, wasn't very productive. ✗

3. the rules regarding **who** and **whom** are the same as for defining relative clauses :

My manager, **whom/who** I really like, is retiring next year.

My manager, **who** prefers bigger teams, wants to recruit more staff.

If there is any doubt, it is better to use **who** because it is much more commonly used than **whom** - both spoken and written.

4. We can use **where** and **whose** in non-defining relative clauses:

I'm going to Venice, **where** I first met my husband, with some friends next year.
The book, **whose** author is Mexican, is a best-seller.

5. We can use prepositions in non-defining relative clauses:

Our manager, **for whom** we have a lot of respect, always listens to our problems. [formal]

Our manager, **who** we have a lot of respect **for**, always listens to our problems. [conversational]

Examples



The people in this picture, **who/whom** I met at university, all live in the USA now.



I have four children. My daughters, **who** are both students, live at home with me.



"How was your trip?" "It rained all week, **which** wasn't pleasant, but we agreed on a deal."



I'm afraid the innovation department, **whose** main target is to suggest new services for our portfolio, is understaffed at the moment.



Sydney, **where** I worked after graduating, is an amazing city.



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