Relative pronouns – who, whom, that, which, whose and what – are used to join clauses together. Relative clauses modify nouns (and certain pronouns), identify people or things and provide additional information about them:

- A man stole your car. He was caught by the police
- The man who stole your car was caught by the police

Needless to say, personal pronouns cannot be used together with a relative pronoun:

*The girl that she greeted you is my cousin

Consider the following examples:

- The young man who sells newspapers at the street corner is my cousin
- The car that won the race is a Ferrari
- This is my new computer, which I was telling you about the other day

In the first two sentences above the relative clause cannot be left out: it is necessary to identify the person or thing we are talking about. On the contrary, in the third example the relative clause only provides additional, non-essential information. Such clauses are called identifying relative and non-identifying relative clauses respectively.

Relative pronouns can refer to either the subject or the object of a sentence. Who and whom are used for people, which is used for things; that can be used for both people and things in identifying relative clauses, whereas in non-identifying clauses, as we shall see, who(m) and which are to be used:

- The woman who/that visited you last night has been killed (subject)
- The woman who(m)/that you met last night has been killed (object)
- The car that/which I want to buy is very expensive (object)

**Identifying relative clauses**

That is commonly used in identifying relative clauses, especially in spoken English. Who and which are more formal, and thus more typical of written language. Whom can be used instead of who as an object relative referring to people:

- The man who/whom you saw coming out of the bank was a robber

It is possible to leave out the relative pronoun when it is the object of an identifying relative clause. On the contrary, subject relatives cannot be omitted:

- The museum (that) I visited is the most important in the country
- The man (who/whom) you saw coming out of the bank was a robber
- I don’t remember the name of the actor who received the Oscar (not: *the name of the actor received the Oscar*)
In identifying relative clauses prepositions are usually placed at the end of the clause. If they are put before the relative pronoun (typically in formal English) whom for people and which for things have to be used (who and that are not possible):

The person from whom I obtained this information is the Head of the Department (formal) // The person (who) I obtained this information from …
This is the pub to which he usually went (formal) // This is the pub (that) he usually went to

That (rather than which) is used after all, every(thing), any(thing), some(thing), no(thing), none, only, little, few, much, next, last, ordinals numbers, and superlatives.

Everything (that) you did was just to spite me
The first motorbike that arrived was the one driven by the current title-holder
This is the fastest car (that) Fiat ever produced

Non-identifying relative clauses

As we have already seen, a non-identifying clause merely adds extra information to the sentence. Therefore, if we left it out, the sentence would still be complete and make sense. These kind of clauses are separated by a comma (or commas) from the rest of the sentence:

This is my friend Carlo, who won the prize last year
My friend Carlo, who won the prize last year, decided not to participate in the competition this time

Non-identifying relative clauses belong to a stylistically formal register, and are consequently used mainly in written English. In spoken English two clauses are normally found instead:

The Pope, who is still not in good health, flew to South America yesterday (written)
The Pope flew to South America yesterday. He’s still not in good health (spoken)

In a non-identifying relative clause that is not found: who(m) and which are used instead. Furthermore, it is to be remembered that in non-identifying relative clauses the pronoun cannot be omitted.

As is the case with identifying relative clauses, whom is used as a relative object referring to people (but who can be found if there is a preposition at the end of the clause):

That individual across the street, who ran away right after the explosion, was a terrorist (subject)
Frank, whom you have invited to your party, is a great guitar player (object)
Jeff, who I went on holiday with, is coming round tomorrow (object)

In non-identifying relative clauses the preposition normally precedes the pronoun, but can also be found at the end of the clause. This, as we have seen, affects the choice between who and whom for object relatives referring to people:

The sales manager, to whom I spoke yesterday, assured me we could be granted a discount
The sales manager, who I spoke to yesterday, assured me we could be granted a discount
Palos, the port from which Columbus set off, is in the south of Spain
Palos, the port which Columbus set off from, is in the south of Spain
When and where can be used instead of at which and in which as relative adverbs. After the word reason, why is used instead of for which:

I don’t remember the year when we went to London
This is the field where I played as a child
The reason why he did it is still unknown

When, where, in which and why can be substituted by that after words referring to time, place, manner or reason:

I’ll always remember the day that we first arrived here
This is the place that I usually go after work
I’ll never forget the way that you treated me
The reasons that he did it are unclear at the moment

Non-identifying clauses with where and when are also to be found:

I like to study at night, when I can concentrate much better
We spent the Christmas holidays in our native town, where we still have lots of friends

Sentence relative

A relative clause can refer to a whole sentence preceding it. In these cases which has to be used, preceded by a comma:

She went away without telling anybody, which was very unkind of her
They decided to wage war at once, which proved to be a very unwise choice

Relative whose

Relative genitive whose can refer to either people or things. It can be used both in identifying and non-identifying relative clauses, and also be the object of a preposition:

This is the player whose impressive performance I was talking you about
This is the car whose body was damaged by hail
Frank, whose house burnt to the ground last week, will move to another neighbourhood
Mark, on whose help we all counted, has decided to withdraw from the project

Of which can be used with non-personal reference instead of whose, with a different word order:

He has convened a meeting the purpose of which (whose purpose) is to analyse the financial situation of the company
Relative *what*

*What* includes a relative pronoun and its antecedent; it means, generally, *the thing(s) that*:

- *This is what I saw*
- *What she said disappointed him*

If there is an antecedent *that* and *which* (when the antecedent is a whole sentence, as we have seen above) have to be used:

- *Everything (that) she said disappointed him*
- *She admitted to having racial prejudices, which disappointed him very much*

**Substitutes of relative clauses**

 Participles (present and past) and to-infinitives can be used instead of identifying relative clauses. The present participle refers to an action happening at about the same time as the action indicated by the main verb of the sentence:

- *People exercising (who exercise) regularly keep in good shape*
- *Many years ago the people visiting the museum (who visited) were allowed to take photographs*

The present participle normally has a progressive meaning:

- *The man carrying a gun (who is/was carrying a gun) ...*

A relative clause needs to be used if the meaning is not progressive:

- *The man who reads the twelve o’clock news has been fired*

The past participle has a passive meaning:

- *All fertilizers used (which are used) in that farm are artificial*
- *All people interviewed (who have been interviewed) agreed on the necessity to safeguard privacy*

The to-infinitive is used with ordinal numbers, with *only, next, last*, and with superlatives. The noun can be left out when the meaning is clear (except after *only*):

- *This is the last exercise to be done (which has to be done)*
- *He is the oldest athlete to take part (who will take part) in the race*
- *She was the only person to understand (who understood) what was happening*
- *I was the first to leave (who left)*