That, Which, & Who: Relative Pronouns and Relative Clauses

To build more sophisticated sentences, we often combine clauses with relative pronouns.

\[
\text{clause} = \text{subject} + \text{verb}
\]

In other words, every sentence has at least one clause!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject = person, place, or thing</th>
<th>Verb = word that shows the time of its action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>He is a boy.</td>
<td>He is a boy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Las Vegas has grown.</td>
<td>Las Vegas has grown.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bedbugs suck.</td>
<td>Bedbugs suck.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

A relative clause cannot make sense on its own. It has to relate or connect to an independent clause in the same sentence.

He is the boy who ate a bug.

He is the boy is an independent clause because it could stand on its own as a sentence, but the who ate a bug part is a relative clause, a sentence fragment that gets its meaning from the independent clause it relates to. A relative clause is one of the many kinds of subordinate (also known as dependent) clauses.

Pronoun = a noun-like function word that gets its meaning from a noun mentioned before it.

Jake said he would text you later.

I need the pen that is in front of you.

A relative pronoun is a pronoun that does the job of linking a relative clause to an independent clause. That, which, who, whom, and whose are relative pronouns for linking adjective (relative) clauses to nouns.

An adjective clause gives description of a noun after the noun or noun phrase being described. An adjective clause can be essential:

I need the pen that is in front of you.

She is the girl who was at the party last week.

Here, the clause is necessary to define the pen and the girl by their distinct description.
An adjective clause can also be non-essential:

- The pen, which appears in my hand, is red.
- The girl, whom we expected to be late, arrived at the party early, instead.

The placement and punctuation of the relative clause indicate whether to consider it essential or not.

**That**

The relative pronoun that is best used for essential descriptions of things.

- I need the pen that is in front of you.

That refers back to the thing-noun pen, which is in the object position after need. An object cannot also be a subject at the same time in a sentence, so to make pen also the subject of is, we need that to fill the subject position of the relative clause.

The word that is also used several other ways, but as a relative pronoun it shows that the following description limits and defines the noun it refers back to. In the example sentence, there is only one pen and it is the pen in front of you.

Notice, also, that the example sentence has no commas in it. This is because we have to have the pen that is in front of you all together to describe and restrict the meaning of the pen. No part of the sentence is optional. It is all essential.

**Which**

*Which* is also for relating clauses, but is best for nonessential clauses, ones that we don’t have to have to limit the meaning of the noun or to understand the independent clause.

- The character’s description, which appeared in the final chapter, was vague and too late in the story.

Notice that the which-clause here is between the subject and verb of the independent clause. Use commas to clearly signal and separate nonessential clauses.

**Who**

*Who* is a relative pronoun that refers back to a person or people.

- They are the women who were at the party last week.

Here, the person-noun is the women. The women is the subject of were at the party last week, which is essential description, so the relative pronoun is in the subject form: who, and no commas are used.
My cousin, who usually never travels anywhere, is spending his honeymoon in Italy.

This who-clause is non-essential (in this context, the description is not necessary to distinguish my cousin from any other cousin), so it is marked with commas.

**Whom**

Two clauses about a person as a *grammatical object* can be related with *whom*.

Here is the woman about whom I spoke.

The original statement ideas were Here is a (particular) woman. and I spoke about the woman. *Since the woman completes the action is and is also the object of the preposition about, the relative pronoun to refer back to her is in the object form: whom.*

To figure out when to use *who* or *whom*, try this test:

If you would say “I . . .,” “she or he . . .,” or “they . . .,” then use “who.”

He sent the text. Now you know who sent the text.

If you would say “. . . me,” “. . . her or him,” or “. . . them,” then use “whom.”

She sent the text to me. Now you know to whom she sent the text.

**Whose**

To identify or describe something (usually a person) by its possessions, qualities, or characteristics and to combine clauses, use *whose*.

She is the girl whose heel broke at the party.

Is this the singer whose album you said was released last Tuesday?

He is the leader whose temper got him into trouble.

That is the fat tabby cat whose videos are watched by millions on YouTube.

**General Guidelines**

There are contexts and sentences where it may not be necessary to strictly follow these rules, but just as a guiding principle, use *who, whom,* and *whose* to describe and relate clauses to people-nouns, use *that* and *whose* to refer to thing-nouns, and use *which* (or *who* with commas) for non-essential or non-restrictive relative clauses.