

Relative clauses: who/that/which

In English, a clause is part of a sentence. A relative clause gives us extra information about a noun in the sentence. It specifies which person or thing the speaker is referring to.

Look at these examples:

- ⋮ Do you know that woman who said ‘hello’ to us?
- ⋮ The jacket that I bought was on sale.
- ⋮ Here’s the document, which has your instructions.

In the above examples, each sentence contains a relative clause.

Complete sentence	Relative clause
Do you know that woman who said ‘hello’ to us?	who said ‘hello’ to us
The jacket that I bought was on sale.	that I bought
Here’s the document, which has your instructions.	which has your instructions

In the above examples, the relative clause specifies...
 – which woman we are talking about.
 – which jacket we bought.
 – which document has the instructions.

Relative pronouns

Relative clauses are usually introduced by a relative pronoun. In these examples, we have the relative pronouns ‘who’, ‘that’ and ‘which’.

In a relative clause, we use ‘who’ to refer to people. We can also use ‘that’ to refer to people, when speaking only.

There is no difference in meaning. However, ‘who’ tends to sound slightly more formal.

- ⋮ The man that sold us the car was very nice.
- ⋮ Anyone who requires more information should see a sales representative.

To refer to things, we can use either ‘that’ or ‘which’. Again, there is usually no difference in meaning between the two, but ‘which’ tends to sound more formal.

- ⋮ The museum that we wanted to visit was closed for renovations.
- ⋮ All exhibits which are currently closed will re-open in December 2018.

To summarize, we use ‘who’ to talk about people, ‘which’ to talk about things, and ‘that’ for both. However, you cannot use ‘who’ to refer to things, or ‘which’ to talk about people.

✓ For people:

- ⋮ Did you see the woman who visited our office yesterday?
- ⋮ Did you see the woman that visited our office yesterday?

But NOT Did you see the woman which visited our office yesterday?

✓ For things:

- ⋮ The soup that you made was very good.
- ⋮ The soup which you made was very good.

But NOT The soup who you made was very good.

✓ Reducing relative clauses

It’s possible to omit the relative pronoun ‘who’, ‘that’ or ‘which’ if it is the object of the verb. Look at these examples:

With the relative pronoun	Without the relative pronoun
The jacket that I bought was on sale.	The jacket I bought was on sale.
The document that you printed is finished.	The document you printed is finished.

EXERCISE 1 Identify the relative clause

Underline the relative clause in each sentence.

- 1/ The foundation which organized CatCon donated money to cat charities.
- 2/ Northern Ireland is the part of the island that remained in the UK.
- 3/ The movie EARLY MAN features big actors and actresses who do the voices of the characters.
- 4/ Walt Whitman is the poet who wrote 'O Captain! My Captain!'
- 5/ 'Alternative facts' is a euphemism which was first used in January 2017.

EXERCISE 2 Select the correct relative pronoun

Choose the correct relative pronoun to complete each sentence.

- 1/ In 2018, the British and Irish governments signed the Good Friday Agreement, _____ declared how to govern Northern Ireland.
 - a. who
 - b. which
- 2/ Purring is good for both cats and for the humans _____ pet them.
 - a. which
 - b. who
- 3/ CREATURE COMFORTS is the movie _____ made Aardman Animations famous.
 - a. that
 - b. who
- 4/ Lana Del Rey wrote a song _____ inspired by a Walt Whitman poem.
 - a. (none)
 - b. that
- 5/ The author _____ created the term 'doublespeak' was George Orwell.
 - a. who
 - b. which

"You should be thankful kitty! I am the one who buys your gourmet food!"



"I'm the one who can talk him down, Dad. You give ME the 50 dollars."

EXERCISE 3 Add the relative pronoun

In each sentence the relative pronoun has been forgotten. Decide which pronoun to add, and where to add it.

- 1/ The subject of the movie THE OUTSIDER is an American joins the IRA. _____
- 2/ The 'Wallace and Gromit' series Aardman created is very popular. _____
- 3/ The poet I liked best in high school is Walt Whitman. _____
- 4/ Grumpy Cat is a famous Internet cat has generated millions of dollars. _____
- 5/ The euphemism he used to describe the civilians killed in the war was 'collateral damage'. _____

EXERCISE 4 Finish the sentence

Choose an ending from the list and add a pronoun to make it into a relative clause to complete each sentence logically.

- 1/ Aardman is a studio _____
- 2/ Euphemisms are words _____
- 3/ CatCon is an event in Los Angeles _____
- 4/ Ralph Waldo Emerson is a poet _____
- 5/ Bobby Sands was an Irish Republican _____

Possible endings:

- a/ It attracts more than 15,000 cat enthusiasts.
- b/ He died in prison.
- c/ He described Whitman's poetry collection LEAVES OF GRASS as "the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom".
- d/ They are used to water down or skew the truth.
- e/ It makes animated films.