**The Relative Adverb**

**Recognize a relative adverb when you find one.**

There are only three relative adverbs: *when*, *where*, and *why*. These three words are relative adverbs when they open adjective clauses.

These are the patterns:

- **Noun of Time** + *When* + Subject + Verb
- **Noun of Place** + *Where* + Subject + Verb
- **Noun of Explanation** + *Why* + Subject + Verb

Read these examples:

Harold searched the *closet* *where* he had stashed the tear-stained letters from Mona, his ex.

*Where he had stashed the tear-stained letters from Mona, his ex* describes *closet* *(noun of place).*

Harold remembers the *day* *when* he first introduced Mona to his twenty-seven cats.

*When he first introduced Mona to his twenty-seven cats* describes *day* *(noun of time).*

The *reason* *why* Mona broke up with Harold was his refusal to vacuum the cat hair that floated in clumps on the hardwood floor.

*Why Mona broke up with Harold* describes *reason* *(noun of explanation).*

Often you can exclude the relative adverb. It is understood to be there even if you do not include it in the sentence.

Consider these examples:
Harold longs for the day when everyone else loves cats the same way that he does.

When Harold is depressed, he finds a place where he can buy a creamy vanilla milkshake, which he shares with his cats.

Picking cat hair off his tongue, Harold never understood the reason why Mona resented his feline friends.

Do not confuse a relative adverb with a subordinate conjunction.

*When, where,* and *why* are the only relative adverbs. However, these three words also function as *subordinate conjunctions.* How do you tell the difference?

The key is to identify the word right in front of the *when, where,* or *why.* If that word is a *noun,* then *when, where,* or *why* is opening an *adjective clause* and is thus a relative adverb:

Patricia dreams of the day when her schedule is her own.

*Day = noun; when = relative adverb.*

Jimmy goes to a school where no team has ever won a championship.

*School = noun; where = relative adverb.*

Professor Wong wants an explanation why half of Sheila's paper matches Wikipedia entries word for word.

*Explanation = noun; why = relative adverb.*

If you do not find a noun in front of *when, where,* or *why,* then these same three words are subordinate conjunctions:

Patricia was sound asleep when the alarm clock rang.

*Asleep = adjective; when = subordinate conjunction.*

Jimmy does not know where he should transfer next fall so that his ferocious chess skills can win school tournaments.
**Know** = verb; **where** = subordinate conjunction.

Sheila cannot explain why her paper matches Wikipedia entries word for word.

**Explain** = verb; **why** = subordinate conjunction.

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**Do not confuse a relative adverb with an interrogative word.**

*When*, *where*, and *why* have a third duty—opening a question. When these words begin a question, you will find an inverted subject and verb and the telltale question mark ( ? ) at the end.

Read these examples:

*When* did you realize that you wanted to adopt a twenty-eighth cat?

*Where* did Mr. Cuddles swat his catnip-filled mouse toy?

*Why* is there cat hair on this hardboiled egg?

Same three words, but a different function this time! In these examples, you have *interrogative words*, not relative adverbs.