

THE RELATIVE PRONOUN

Recognize a relative pronoun when you find one.

The five relative pronouns—*who*, *whom*, *whose*, *which*, and *that*—introduce **adjective** (or *relative*) **clauses**.

The clauses follow one of these two patterns:

Relative Pronoun + **Subject** + **Verb**

Relative Pronoun as the Subject + **Verb**

Read these examples:

Who often wears plaids with polka dots

Whose hand reached for one of Terri’s ponytails

Whom the enthusiastic dog knocked to the ground

Which we saved from the trash collectors

Which is purple velvet with torn cushions

That Martha carries in her book bag

That has leaked all over the final copy of Martha’s research essay

Adjective clauses are **subordinate**; they are not full sentences. You must embed each adjective clause in a **main clause**, where it will provide description for a **noun** or **pronoun**.

In addition to the five relative pronouns above, there are *indefinite* relative pronouns. An *ever* ends each of these words: *whoever*, *whosoever*, *whomever*, *whosever*, and *whatever* (sometimes just *what* when the meaning is *that which*).

Read these examples:

Whoever dares enter that spooky house

Whosoever desires praise

Whomever that scoundrel enlists to corroborate the lie

Whatever Professor Martin requires for an A

What Samantha needs to know for her physics exam

These *ever* versions are indefinite because instead of *modifying* specific nouns, they *function* as nonspecific nouns, becoming **subjects**, **objects**, or **complements**.

Read this pair:

The brave soul **who enters that spooky house** will earn our respect.

Who enters that spooky house describes the noun *soul*.

Whoever enters that spooky house will earn our respect.

Whoever enters that spooky house = subject of the **verb will earn**.

Or this pair:

With skepticism, we questioned the witness **whom the scoundrel had enlisted to corroborate the lie**.

Whom the scoundrel had enlisted to corroborate the lie describes the noun *witness*.

With skepticism, we will question **whomever the scoundrel enlists to corroborate the lie**.

Whomever the scoundrel enlists to corroborate the lie = **direct object**.

Or this pair:

Class participation, **which Professor Martin requires for an A**, inspired Latoya to raise her hand every day.

Which Professor Martin requires for an A describes the noun *participation*.

Whatever Professor Martin requires for an A will inspire Latoya's classroom behavior.

Whatever Professor Martin requires for an A = subject for the verb **will inspire**.

Or this pair:

The winner will be the baker **who creates the tallest cake**.

Who creates the tallest cake describes the noun **baker**.

The winner will be **whoever creates the tallest cake**.

Whoever creates the tallest cake = subject complement.

Pair each relative pronoun with the right antecedent.

A relative pronoun (and the **adjective clause** that it introduces) provides description for the **noun** or **pronoun** in front of it. That noun or pronoun is the relative pronoun's **antecedent**.

If the antecedent is a person or named animal, use **who**, **whom**, or **whose**.

I gave **Grandpa**, **who** always has stomach space, my tuna fish sandwich.

I gave **Shamu the killer whale**, **who** always has stomach space, my tuna fish sandwich.

I gave **our cat Bob**, **who** always has stomach space, my tuna fish sandwich.

I will give this tuna fish sandwich to **anyone who** has the stomach space for it.

If the antecedent is alive or inanimate but *nonspecific*, you can use **that** (although **who** is often best for people).

The spectators cheered the **runner that** blazed past them.

The spectators cheered the **race cars that** blazed past them.

The spectators cheered the **cheetah that** blazed past them.

If the antecedent is an inanimate object or unnamed animal, use **which**.

Hollie polished the **tortoise**, **which** gleamed in the light.

Hollie polished **Grandpa's bald head**, **which** gleamed in the light.

Hollie polished the **orchid leaves**, **which** gleamed in the light.

Hollie polished the **bowling ball**, **which** gleamed in the light.

Do not confuse a relative pronoun with an interrogative.

Yes, **who**, **whom**, **whose**, and **which** all begin **adjective clauses**, and when they do, they are relative pronouns. These four words have other jobs, however, so they are not relative pronouns *exclusively*.

Who, **whom**, **whose**, and **which** are also interrogatives—words that introduce direct and indirect questions.

Consider this pair:

The tennis players **whom** Fiona admires avoid childish tantrums on the court.

Whom = relative pronoun introducing an adjective clause.

Whom does Fiona admire in the upcoming match?

Whom = interrogative word to request information.

Or this pair:

Shanaya, **whose** scratchy scarf made her cheeks itch, happily entered the warm building.

Whose = relative pronoun introducing an adjective clause.

Whose scratchy scarf is this?

Whose = interrogative word to request information.

Or this pair:

Our competition, **who** had no reason to be nice, held the door for us.

Who = relative pronoun introducing an adjective clause.

At the sign-in desk, we inquired **who** our competition would be.

Who = interrogative word to request information.

That has many side hustles.

Yes, **that** can begin an **adjective clause**, and when it does, it is a relative pronoun.

That can also be a **subordinate conjunction**, a **demonstrative adjective**, or a **demonstrative pronoun** too!

The function of a **that** in a sentence determines what you eventually call it.

If **that** opens a clause that describes a **noun** or **pronoun** right in front of it, call **that** a relative pronoun.

Read these examples:

The computer **that** I lent Robert is sticky with spilled soda.

That = relative pronoun.

Be forewarned! Anything **that** you lend Robert will be returned broken or stained—if it gets back to you at all!

That = relative pronoun.

If **that** is introducing a clause—just not an adjective clause—it is a subordinate conjunction.

Here are examples:

We wish **that** Robert took better care of our things.

That = subordinate conjunction.

Robert understands **that** I am angry about the ruined computer.

That = subordinate conjunction.

Other times, **that** will function as a demonstrative adjective (modifying the noun right after it) or a demonstrative pronoun (replacing a noun/**noun phrase** that came earlier).

Consider these examples:

My grandmother, who wanted to contribute to my academic success this semester, gave me **that** computer as a birthday gift.

That = demonstrative adjective modifying the noun **computer**.

A moment of generosity cost me my computer. I will not allow **that** to happen again.

That = demonstrative pronoun replacing the noun phrase **a moment of generosity**.

