

53 Relative clauses

Napoleon Bonaparte, who was born in Corsica, was France's greatest military leader.



1 Relative clauses and alternatives

A relative pronoun can be the subject or object of a relative clause:

*Last week I saw that film **which** won all the Oscars.* (subject = the film won the Oscars)

*Last week I saw the film **which** you made at college.* (object = you made the film)

To make the meaning clear, we usually put the relative clause as close as possible to the noun it refers to:

~~✗ You can buy this dish from your local supermarket, which is made from organic wheat.~~

✓ You can buy this dish, **which is made from organic wheat**, from your local supermarket.

Relative clauses are not the only way to define or add information. Alternatives include:

People who have a complaint → *people **with a complaint*** (prepositional phrase ► Unit 54.4)

The man who lives downstairs → *The man **living downstairs*** (participle clause ► Unit 55.1/2)

The first person who helped me → *The first person **to help me*** (infinitive clause ► Unit 56.1)

2 Defining relative clauses

A defining relative clause identifies or classifies a noun or pronoun in the main clause.

IDENTIFYING *Is this the book **that you were looking for**?*

CLASSIFYING *Would all those **who have booked dinner** please go into the restaurant?*

The defining relative clause gives information which is necessary for the sense of the sentence. In the first example above, *Is this the book?* does not convey the full meaning of the whole sentence, i.e. the specific book that you were looking for.

We often use these clauses to describe an important quality of someone or something:

*Van Gogh was an artist **who used a lot of bold, vibrant colours**.*

! In defining relative clauses we can omit the relative pronoun when it is the object of the relative clause, but NOT when it is the subject:

~~✗ I saw the film won all the Oscars.~~ ✓ *I saw the film you made at college.*

In American English *that* is more common than *which* or *who* in defining relative clauses.

Relative clauses with introductory *it* ► Unit 75.2

3 Non-defining relative clauses

A non-defining relative clause gives extra information about a noun or pronoun in the main clause (or about the whole clause), but it doesn't define or classify; the main clause still makes sense without it:

Napoleon Bonaparte was France's greatest military leader.

+ EXTRA INFORMATION *Napoleon Bonaparte was born in Corsica.*

→ *Napoleon Bonaparte, **who was born in Corsica**, was France's greatest military leader.*

Napoleon lost the Battle of Waterloo in 1815.

+ EXTRA INFORMATION *The fact that he lost the battle led to his exile.*

→ *Napoleon lost the Battle of Waterloo in 1815, **which led to his exile**.*