



RELATIVE CLAUSE:

Does it Specify Which One?

Or Does it Just Describe
the One and Only?

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INTRODUCTION

The humble comma can make important differences in the meaning of a sentence. The following pages show examples of this in something called a “relative clause”. The term is a bit technical, but you’ll see that it’s something that you use many times a day.

Relative clauses are often misused – sometimes leading to serious misunderstandings, other times simply displaying poor grammar. When speaking to people, we have tools such as pauses, changes in tone and instant feedback to tell us whether we have used relative clauses properly to get a point across. When writing, we have none of these advantages. We must rely upon the tools of grammar.

THEORY

THE CONCEPT

Relative clauses are subordinate clauses that modify a noun. Here is an example:

John read the book that Mary loaned to him.

The underlined words are a relative clause. It exists only in relation to the noun "book", which it modifies.

There are two types of relative clauses. One is a specifying clause. The other is a clause that only describes. The difference between the two lies in a humble comma.

SPECIFYING CLAUSES

This type of clause specifies which person or thing we are talking about. The example cited above is such a clause. If the underlined clause were omitted, we would not know which book John read. Defining clauses are also known as:

- restrictive clauses; or
- limiting clauses.

Here is an example:

I will not be able to make the flight for Toronto that leaves at 4:30 this afternoon.

Here the speaker is specifying which of a number of flights from Toronto that she will not be able to make: the one that leaves at 4:30 this afternoon.

DESCRIBING CLAUSES

A describing clause tells us more about the noun when the person or thing we are talking about has already been established. Describing clauses are also known as:

- non-defining clauses;
- parenthetical clauses;
- non-essential clauses;
- non-restrictive clauses; or
- non-limiting clauses.

Here is an example of a describing clause:

Anne spent all afternoon in her office, which is not air conditioned.

In this case, the underlined clause simply tells us more information about Anne's office. It doesn't tell us in which office she spent the afternoon. That has been defined already by the word "her".

THE RULE

How do you tell the difference between specifying and describing clauses? It's easy:

- Specifying clauses are never preceded by a comma.
- Describing clauses are always preceded by a comma (and followed by a comma when the clause occurs in the middle of a sentence).

EXAMPLES

Defining Clauses

This morning Michelle is meeting with the auditor who is reviewing our program.

This sentence specifies which auditor Michelle is meeting this afternoon: the one who is reviewing our program.

Peter will attend the 2001 International Widget Association conference that is being held in Montréal on July 15, 2001.

This implies that several 2001 International Widget conferences are being held this year. The defining clause specifies which one Peter has decided to attend: the one being held in Montréal on July 15, 2001.

Describing Clauses

I would like you to meet our auditor, who has worked here for three years.

Here, there is no question which auditor I am talking about. We have only one of them. This just tells you more information about her: that she has worked here for three years.

Peter will attend the 2001 International Widget Association Conference, which is being held in Montréal on July 15, 2001.

This statement implies that only one 2001 International Widget Association conference is being held this year. The describing clause just tells us more about it: that it is being held in Montréal on July 15, 2001.

Jacqueline has decided to turn this problem over to the management consulting unit that has expertise in database management.

The defining clause here implies that there are a number of management consulting units to which Jacqueline could turn for help. However, she has chosen one of those units over the others: the one that has expertise in database management.

In other words, the key message of this sentence is that Jacqueline has decided to turn the problem over to one particular management consulting unit (the one with expertise in database management) rather than one of the others.

Jacqueline has decided to turn this problem over to the Management Consulting Unit, which has expertise in database management.

This sentence implies that there is only one management consulting unit. The describing clause simply tells us more about that unit: that it has expertise in database management.

In other words, the key message of the sentence is that Jacqueline has decided to turn the problem over to the management consulting unit – as opposed to, say, doing nothing, asking the database administrator to solve the problem, or calling in outside consultants.

WHICH, THAT OR . . . ?

Grammarians love to argue about which pronouns belong in what kind of relative clause. However, for our purposes, the rules are fairly simple. The chart below gives you a quick guide to the pronouns to use in various situations.

Type of Pronoun	Type of Noun Modified	Type of Relative Clause	Pronoun to Use	Example
nominative	people	specifying	who	This morning I met with the man <u>who</u> called you yesterday.
		describing	who	This morning I met with John, <u>who</u> called you yesterday.
	things	specifying	that	Jane has been chosen to lead the task force <u>that</u> we set up last week to develop a business plan.
		describing	which	Jane has been chosen to lead the Business Plan Task Force, <u>which</u> we set up last week.
possessive	people	specifying	whose	This morning I gave a ride to a friend <u>whose</u> car is in for a tune-up
		describing	whose	This morning I gave a ride to John, <u>whose</u> car is in for a tune-up.
	things	specifying	whose	You are scheduled to meet next week with the president of a company <u>whose</u> expansion plans include copper mining in Chile.
		describing	whose	You are scheduled to meet next week with the President of XL Industries, <u>whose</u> expansion plans include copper mining in Chile.
objective	people	specifying	whom	I have attached letters of congratulations to the employees to <u>whom</u> you will be presenting awards on July 26, 1995.
		describing	whom	I have attached a letter of congratulations to Mr. John Doe, to <u>whom</u> you will present an award on July 26, 1995.
	things	specifying	which	I have attached a list of the companies to <u>which</u> we sent invitations to the conference.
		describing	which	I have attached a profile of XL Industries, to <u>which</u> we sent an invitation to the conference.

WHICH

The Statement

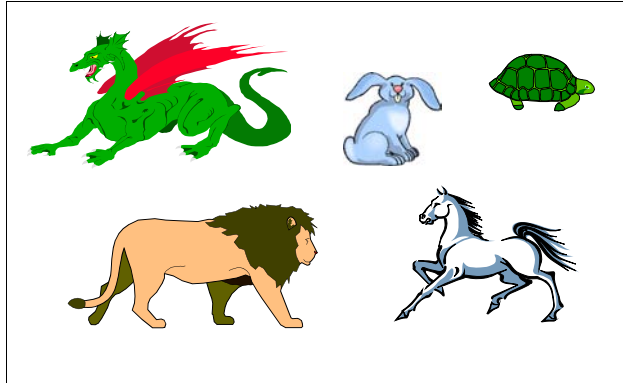
The horse, which is white, costs \$10.00.

What it Means

There is only one horse here. It costs \$10.00. By the way, it is white.

“Which” or “That”?

In this case, you have no choice. You must use “which”. Note also the use of commas here.



THAT

The Statement

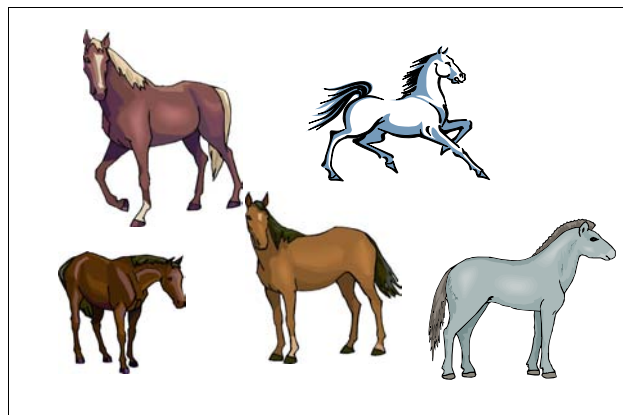
The horse that is white costs \$10.00.

What it Means

We’re looking at a number of horses here.
I want you to know which one costs \$10.00. It is the one that’s white.

“Which” or “That”?

In this case, you have a choice. You could use either “which” or “that” without changing the meaning. I prefer “that”, because it helps to make it clear that I’m specifying, not just describing. Note also the lack of commas here.



CLOSING COMMA IN DESCRIBING CLAUSES

If a describing clause occurs in the middle of a sentence, it must be followed by a closing comma. Remember that a describing clause is also known as a parenthetical clause. You can no more omit a closing comma than you can omit a closing parenthesis:

Wrong

We plan to finalize the memorandum to Cabinet, which will require extensive consultations with other departments by the end of September 1995.

Right

We plan to finalize the memorandum to Cabinet, which will require extensive consultations with other departments, by the end of September 1995.

Note the effect of omitting the closing comma in the first example. Doing so suggests that the consultations will be completed by the end of September. The question of when the memorandum to Cabinet will be finalized is left unanswered.

Here is the same sentence, using parentheses rather than commas to set off the describing clause:

Wrong

We plan to finalize the memorandum to Cabinet (which will require extensive consultations with other departments by the end of September 1995.

Right

We plan to finalize the memorandum to Cabinet (which will require extensive consultations with other departments) by the end of September 1995.

In this example, omitting the closing parenthesis is obviously wrong. However, a thoughtful reader will realize that the sentence is ambiguous. He or she cannot be sure where the closing parenthesis was intended to fall.

PROXIMITY

If possible, relative clauses should be located right next to the word they modify. Intervening words can create confusion and reduce reading ease:

Pierre added a chapter to the report that deals with the growing use of advanced materials in the widget industry.

This sentence fails if the writer intended to modify "a chapter" with "that deals with the growing use of advanced materials in the widget industry." Instead, the relative clause should be placed right beside the word it modifies:

Pierre added to the report by writing a chapter that dealt with the growing use of advanced materials in the widget industry.

Here is another example:

Gordon met with a number of factory managers who were concerned about security of supply of raw materials for their operations on January 22, 1995.

While the writer's intent becomes clear once you reread that sentence, the syntax is badly fractured. To correct it, the sentence should be rearranged:

On January 22, 1995, Gordon met with a number of factory managers who were concerned about security of supply of raw materials for their operations.

You could also solve the problem by splitting the sentence in two:

Gordon met with a number of factory managers on January 22, 1995. They were concerned about security of supply of raw materials for their operations.

MISSING PRONOUNS

The usual identifier for a relative clause is a relative pronoun (“which”, “that”, “who”, etc.). However, it is also common for the relative pronoun to be dropped, even though it’s still implicit in the sentence. The following pages give examples.

SPECIFYING

The Statement

The treaty negotiated in May has the support of all the provincial governments.



Treaty #1



This treaty was negotiated in March.

The Missing Relative Pronoun

The treaty that was negotiated in May has the support of all the provincial governments.



Treaty #2



This treaty was negotiated in April.

What It Means

My readers know that I could conceivably be talking about any of several treaties. Therefore, I am specifying that I'm only talking about the treaty that was negotiated in May. It's the one that has the support of all the provinces.



Treaty #3



This treaty was negotiated in May. It's the one I'm talking about. It has the support of all the provinces.

What's the Difference?

Note that there are no commas before or after "negotiated in May". You must not use them here.

DESCRIBING

The Statement

The treaty, negotiated in May, has the support of all provincial governments.

The Missing Relative Pronoun

The treaty, which was negotiated in May, has the support of all provincial governments.


What It Means

My reader already knows which treaty I'm talking about, perhaps because I've specified it in a previous sentence. For example, somewhere earlier before I might have said something like this: "We have negotiated a treaty on the volume of widget exports to the United States." The key point I am making in the sentence here is that the treaty has the support of all provincial governments. The fact that it was negotiated in May is interesting, and perhaps even important. But that fact is not needed for you to know which treaty I'm talking about. It describes, but it is not needed to specify.

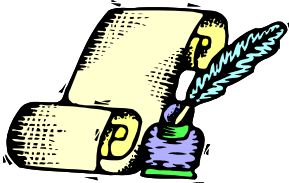
What's the Difference?

The difference lies in the commas that you see before and after "negotiated in May". You must use them here.

In the sentence on the previous page, there are no commas before and after "negotiated in May". In the sentence on this page, there are commas. This is a signal that tells you that "negotiated in May" describes, but is not needed to specify.



The one and only treaty



There is only one treaty that I could possibly be talking about here. My main point is to let you know that it has the support of all provincial governments. By the way, you might be interested to know that it was negotiated in May.

SPECIFYING

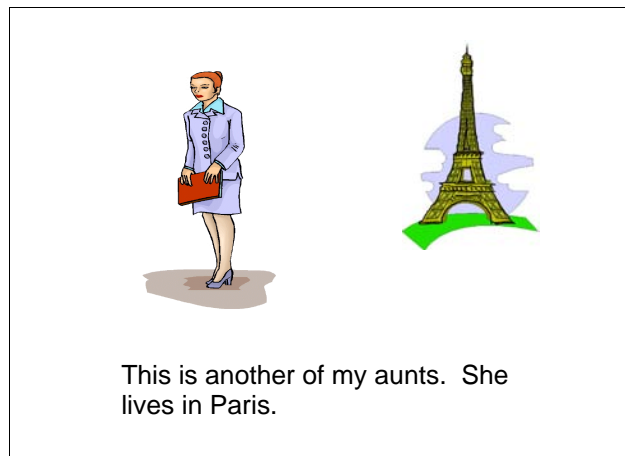
The Statement

My aunt from Athens is coming to visit me next week.



The Missing Relative Pronoun

My aunt who is from Athens is coming to visit me next week.

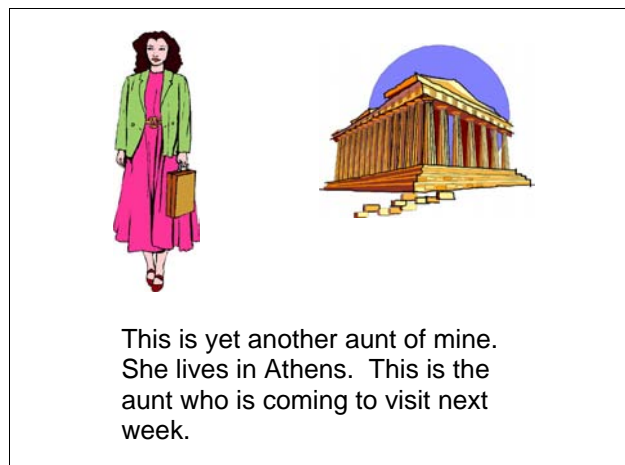


What it Means

I have a number of aunts.
Therefore
I have to specify which one is coming
to visit me next week, not merely
describe her. It's the aunt from
from Paris who is coming visit.

What's the Difference?

Note the lack of commas before
and after "from Paris". You must
not use them here.



DESCRIBING

The Statement

My aunt, from Rome, is coming to visit me next week.

The Missing Relative Pronoun

My aunt, who is from Rome, is coming to visit me next week.

What it Means



I have only one aunt. She is coming to visit me next week. By the way, you might also be interested to know that she lives in Rome.

Because I have only one aunt, I am only describing her here. I do not need to specify which aunt she is.

What's the Difference?

Note commas before and after "from Rome". You must use them here.

My one and only aunt

This is my one and only aunt. She's coming to visit me next week. By the way, she lives in Rome.