

Relative clauses

English Grammar · B1

who vs. which / that

Relative pronouns

who	which	where	whose
a person	a thing	a place	belonging
<i>the man who called</i>	<i>the book which won</i>	<i>the town where ...</i>	<i>the girl whose bag ...</i>

Relative pronouns: reference card grid

Relative clauses provide **additional information** about a preceding noun. They are introduced by **relative pronouns**:

- **who**: refers to **people**.
- **which**: refers to **things**.
- **that**: refers to either people or things (common in informal speech).

The woman who lives next door is a doctor.

The woman living next door is a doctor.

This is the book which won the prize.

That is the award-winning book.

Note Relative pronouns go immediately after the **noun they refer to**, introducing supplementary information.

where, when, whose

- **where**: refers to **place**. **when**: refers to **time**. **whose**: indicates **possession** (“’s”).

That’s the town where I grew up.

That is the town where I grew up.

She's the writer whose books I love.

She is the writer whose works I like.

Note whose is followed directly by a noun (whose books), indicating “that person’s books”.

Omitting Relative Pronouns

When the relative pronoun acts as the **object** in the clause, it can be **omitted** (common in both speech and writing):

The film (that) we saw was great.

The movie (that) we watched was great.

How to decide:

- If the relative pronoun is the **subject** (followed immediately by a verb) → **cannot** omit.
- If the relative pronoun is the **object** (followed by “subject + verb”) → **can** omit.

Note Must be retained when acting as subject: *the man **who** called* (cannot omit who).

Common Errors

- × ~~The man which lives next door...~~ → ✓ The man **who** / **that**... — Do not use which for people.
- × ~~The book what I read...~~ → ✓ The book **that** / **which** I read... — English has no usage of what as a relative pronoun.
- × ~~This is the house which I live.~~ → ✓ ...the house **where** I live / ...the house which I live **in**. — When the clause lacks a preposition, either use where or supply the missing preposition.
- × ~~The friend who I met him yesterday...~~ → ✓ The friend who I met yesterday... — Since the relative pronoun already replaces the object, him / it cannot appear again in the clause.