

It's All Relative (Clauses)

Writers use relative clauses when they want to add more information to their sentences without having to start new ones. This handout will help you understand what relative clauses are and how they are used, especially in deciding when to use “that” or “which” and “who” or “whom.”

Defining Relative Clauses

Relative clauses are like independent clauses because they contain subjects and verbs. However, relative clauses are unlike independent clauses because they cannot stand on their own as sentences. Relative clauses act adjectivally, and we attach them to independent clauses.

Example of a Relative Clause

“I feel like eating a vegan pizza *that* is really, really spicy,” said Ines.

In this sentence, the relative clause “*that* is really, really spicy” is attached to the independent clause “I feel like eating a vegan pizza.” The relative clause cannot stand on its own because it is describing the pizza Ines feels like eating.

Using Relative Clauses

We attach relative clauses to independent clauses using relative pronouns or relative adverbs. There are five relative pronouns—that, which, who, whom, and whose—and three relative adverbs—where, when, and why.

That or Which

Deciding when to use “that” and “which” can be puzzling. “That” refers to things and never refers to people.

Example of “That”

“I feel like eating a vegan pizza *that* is really, really spicy” said Ines.

We would not say Ines feels like eating a vegan pizza “*who* is really, really spicy” because a vegan pizza is a thing, not a person, although a person can be spicy.

“Which” also refers to things and never to people, but “which” is used in nonrestrictive relative clauses (to provide nonessential information).

Example of “Which”

“The Figgy Piggy, *which* is made of crisp bacon, sweet black figs, fresh sage, and feta cheese, is Jenn’s favorite pizza at Pizza My Heart.”

“The Figgy Piggy” is essential information because it tells us what Jenn’s favorite pizza at Pizza My Heart is. We do not need to know what Jenn’s favorite pizza is made of to know “The Figgy Piggy” is her favorite, so the relative clause starting with the relative pronoun *which* is enclosed in commas.

Who or Whom

Deciding when to use “who” and “whom” can also be puzzling. “Who” and “whom” refer to people and never to things. “Who” refers to the subject of a sentence while “whom” either refers to the object of a sentence or the object of a preposition. To decide when to use “who” and “whom,” conduct the subject/object pronoun test. (See the handout [“Who, Whom, Whoever, Whomever”](#) for more information.)

Examples of “Who” and “Whom”

“Actually, sir, Nicky is the one *who* ordered the plain cheese pizza.”

In this sentence, *who* refers to Nicky, a person, not a thing. Nicky is also the subject of the sentence. She is the one “*who* ordered the plain cheese pizza.”

“The waiter at Blue Line Pizza put the Aphrodite, a pizza made of artichoke hearts, kalamata olives, sundried tomatoes, basil, feta, and mozzarella, in front of *whom* he thought was Kerri.”

In this sentence, *whom* refers to the object of the preposition “of,” Kerri. Kerri is not an object, but she is the object of a preposition as well as the verb “put,” so *whom* is the correct choice.

Whose

“Whose” is like “who” and “whom,” referring to people and never to things, but “whose” shows possession.

Example of “Whose”

“I don’t know *whose* Chicago-style pizza this is,” said Evin, “but I’m eating it.”

In this sentence, “whose” refers to the unspecified owner of the Chicago-style pizza, a person and possessor.

Relative Adverbs

There are three relative adverbs: where, when, and why. We use relative adverbs to refer to place, time, and reason.

Examples of Relative Adverbs

“California Pizza Kitchen is *where* Jack used to order a pizza made with pear and gorgonzola.”
In this sentence, *where* refers to the place Jack used to order a pizza made with pear and gorgonzola.

“Daniel remembers *when* he could eat pizza not made with gluten-free crust.”
In this sentence, *when* refers to the time Daniel could eat pizza not made with gluten-free crust.

“Luke does not understand *why* no one at the Writing Center invited him to go out for pizza.”
In this sentence, *why* refers to the unspecified reason no one at the Writing Center invited Luke to go out for pizza.

The Invisible That

We can attach relative clauses to independent clauses and omit relative pronouns if the relative pronouns or relative clauses are in object positions.

Example of the Invisible “That”

“Everyone at the Writing Center went to the pizza place (*that*) I recommended.”

Because the relative clause is in the object position, *that* can be omitted.

Determining if Information Is Essential or Nonessential

Relative clauses provide essential information or nonessential information through restrictive relative clauses or nonrestrictive relative clauses.

Restrictive Relative Clauses

We use restrictive relative clauses to provide essential information. Essential information is not enclosed in commas and begins with the relative pronouns “that” or “who.”

Examples of Restrictive Relative Clauses

“I feel like eating a pizza *that* is really, really spicy,” said Ines.

In this sentence, “*that* is really, really spicy” is essential information because it describes the pizza Ines wants to eat, so it is not enclosed in commas.

“Actually, sir, Nicky is the one *who* ordered the cheese pizza.”

In this sentence, “*who* ordered the cheese pizza” is essential information because it describes Nicky, the one who ordered it, and is not enclosed in commas.

Nonrestrictive Relative Clauses

We use nonrestrictive relative clauses to provide nonessential information. Nonessential information is enclosed in commas and begins with the relative pronoun “which” or “who.”

Examples of Nonrestrictive Relative Clauses

“The Figgy Piggy,” *which* is made of crisp bacon, sweet black figs, fresh sage, and feta cheese, is Jenn’s favorite pizza at Pizza My Heart.

As mentioned earlier, we do not need to know what Jenn’s favorite pizza is made of to know that her favorite is “Figgy Piggy,” so the relative clause starting with the relative pronoun *which* is nonessential information and is enclosed in commas.

Daniel, *who* is not only gluten free but also vegetarian and lactose intolerant, is a Writing Tutor at the Writing Center.

In this sentence, we do not need to know Daniel is gluten free, vegetarian, and lactose intolerant to know he is a Writing Tutor at the Writing Center, so the relative clause starting with the relative pronouns *who* is nonessential information and enclosed in commas.

Determining Subject-Verb Agreement in Relative Clauses

Pronouns substitute for nouns. Plural pronouns take plural verbs like singular pronouns take singular verbs. Relative pronouns are no different. Relative pronouns substitute for the nouns preceding them.

Example of Subject-Verb Agreement in a Relative Clause

“I feel like eating a vegan pizza *that* is really, really spicy,” said Ines.

In this sentence, *that* refers to the vegan pizza, a singular noun, so *that* becomes a singular relative pronoun, thus making the verb preceding it, “is,” also singular.

Activity 1: That or Which?

Choose the relative pronouns that best fit the sentences and fill in the blanks.

1. The pizza (that / which) is made of French fries and Oreos is my favorite pizza.
2. The “Al Bundy,” (that / which) is made of feta cheese, fresh roasted garlic, fresh basil, and sundried tomatoes, is my favorite pizza at Pizz’a Chicago.

Activity 2: Who or Whom?

Choose the relative pronouns that best fit the sentences.

1. John Schnatter is not the man (who/whom) owns Little Caesars.
2. The delivery boy at Pizza Hut delivered the ultimate cheesy crust pizza to (who/whom) he thought ordered it.

Activity 3: Restrictive or. Nonrestrictive Clauses?

Read the following sentences carefully. Then decide which sentence contains a restrictive clause and which one contains a nonrestrictive clause.

1. The two men who founded Domino’s achieved pizza domination when they invented the 3D car-top sign. (restrictive / nonrestrictive)
2. Shakey’s Pizza, which is known for their \$6.99 bunch-a-lunch, just opened a new restaurant in Downtown San Jose next to Philz Coffee. (restrictive / nonrestrictive)

Answer Key for Activity 1

1. The pizza **that** is made of French fries and Oreos is my favorite pizza.
2. The “Al Bundy,” **which** is made of feta cheese, fresh roasted garlic, fresh basil, and sundried tomatoes, is my favorite pizza at Pizz’a Chicago.

Answer Key for Activity 2

1. John Schnatter is not the man **who** owns Little Caesars.
2. The delivery boy at Pizza Hut delivered the ultimate cheesy crust pizza to **whom** he thought ordered it.

Answer Key for Activity 3

1. The two men who founded Domino’s achieved pizza domination when they invented the 3D car-top sign. (**restrictive**)
2. Shakey’s Pizza, which is known for its \$6.99 bunch-a-lunch, just opened a new restaurant in Downtown San Jose next to Philz Coffee. (**nonrestrictive**, and also not true)

References

“Relative Clauses.” *writingcenter.unc.edu/relative-clauses*. N.d. Web. 25 November 2017.

“The Relative Clause.” *http://www.chompchomp.com/terms/relativeclause.html*. N.d. Web. 25 November 2017.