

RELATIVE CLAUSES - DEFINING VS NON-DEFINING

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Grammar focus: Essential and additional information, relative pronouns and commas.

1. Look & Learn – Two Types of Relative Clauses

We use relative clauses to give more information about people, places, things and animals. There are two main types.

A. Defining relative clauses

A defining relative clause gives us essential information. It tells us exactly which person or thing we are talking about.

Examples:

- The woman who works at the hospital is my aunt.
- The phone that I bought yesterday is already broken.
- The students who arrive late must wait outside.

Without the relative clause, we may not know which woman, phone or students we mean.

Remember:

- The information is essential.
- We do NOT use commas.
- We can use who, which or that.
- We cannot leave out the relative pronoun in every situation, but sometimes it can be omitted when it is the object.

B. Non-defining relative clauses

A non-defining relative clause gives us extra information. We already know which person or thing we are talking about.

Examples:

- My aunt, who works at the hospital, lives near us.
- My new phone, which I bought yesterday, is already broken.
- Our English teacher, who comes from Canada, speaks three languages.

The main sentence still makes sense without the extra information.

Remember:

- The information is extra, not essential.
- We use commas around the extra information.
- We use who or which.
- We do NOT use that.
- We cannot leave out the relative pronoun.

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2. Compare the Meaning

Read the sentences. Notice how the meaning changes.

A. Defining

The students who passed the exam can go home.

Meaning: Only the students who passed can go home. Other students may not go home.

B. Non-defining

The students, who passed the exam, can go home.

Meaning: We are talking about all the students. They all passed the exam and can go home.

Important: A small comma can change the meaning of a sentence!

3. Quick Grammar Reference

Feature	Defining	Non-defining
Information	Essential	Extra
Commas	No	Yes
Who	Yes	Yes
Which	Yes	Yes
That	Yes	No
Pronoun omitted	Sometimes	No

Look at these examples:

- The restaurant that serves Italian food is expensive.
- The restaurant, which serves Italian food, is expensive.

In the first sentence, we use the information to identify the restaurant. In the second, we already know which restaurant we mean.

4. Activity A – Defining or Non-defining?

Read each sentence. Write D for defining or ND for non-defining.

1. My brother, who lives in Australia, is visiting next month.
2. People who exercise regularly often feel healthier.
3. London, which is the capital of England, is a popular tourist destination.
4. Our school, which opened in 1995, has 500 students.
5. The woman who helped me was very kind.
6. The books that are on the table belong to Sarah.
7. My father, who is a doctor, works at the city hospital.
8. Students who study every day usually make good progress.

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5. Activity B – Choose the Correct Relative Pronoun

Circle the correct answer.

1. My uncle, (who / that) lives in Canada, is a teacher.
2. The car (which / who) is parked outside belongs to my neighbour.
3. This is the restaurant (that / who) we visited last weekend.
4. My laptop, (that / which) is quite old, still works well.
5. The people (who / which) work here are very friendly.
6. My hometown, (which / that) is near the sea, attracts many tourists.
7. The woman (which / who) called you is waiting outside.
8. The film (that / who) we watched was excellent.

6. Activity C – Add the Commas

Rewrite each sentence. Add commas where necessary. Some sentences do not need commas. (Assume the speaker has only one sister and one bicycle).

1. My sister who lives in Bangkok is a nurse.
2. The man who drives the school bus is very friendly.
3. Mount Everest which is the highest mountain in the world is in the Himalayas.
4. The students who arrive before 8 o'clock can enter the classroom.
5. My bicycle which I bought last year needs repairing.
6. The woman who is wearing a red jacket is my teacher.

Remember: Some sentences can have different meanings depending on the situation. The context tells us whether the information is essential or extra.

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Answer Key

4. Activity A – Defining or Non-defining?

1. ND
2. D
3. ND
4. ND
5. D
6. D
7. ND
8. D

5. Activity B – Choose the Correct Relative Pronoun

1. who
2. which
3. that
4. which
5. who
6. which
7. who
8. that

6. Activity C – Add the Commas

1. My sister, who lives in Bangkok, is a nurse. (Assuming the speaker has one sister.)
2. The man who drives the school bus is very friendly. (No commas.)
3. Mount Everest, which is the highest mountain in the world, is in the Himalayas.
4. The students who arrive before 8 o'clock can enter the classroom. (No commas.)
5. My bicycle, which I bought last year, needs repairing. (Assuming the speaker has one bicycle.)
6. The woman who is wearing a red jacket is my teacher. (No commas.)

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