
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute Grammar

Defining and non-defining relative clauses



This is not a word-for-word transcript

Callum

Hello. Welcome to 6 Minute Grammar with me, Callum.

Catherine

And me, Catherine. Hello.

Callum

In this programme, we're talking about relative clauses.

Catherine

Yes, relative clauses add information about the person or thing that you're talking about. There are two kinds of relative clauses: defining and non-defining.

Callum

Let's begin with defining relative clauses. Here's Finn with an example:

Finn

The man **whose phone I found** gave me a reward.

Callum

Thanks Finn. The clause **whose phone I found** is a defining relative clause because it identifies which man Finn is talking about. If I ask the question 'which man' – the relative clause answers it: the man **whose phone I found**.

Catherine

That's right. And relative clauses usually start with a relative pronoun. We use **who** for people, **which** for things, **that** for both people and things and **whose** where a possessive is needed. Let's hear another defining relative clause:

Finn

I've lost the t-shirt **that my mother gave me**.

Callum

How careless of you Finn! Here, the relative clause **that my mother gave me** tells us which t-shirt Finn is talking about.

Finn

I've lost the t-shirt **that my mother gave me**.

Callum

Let's move on to non-defining relative clauses. Here's an example:

Finn

David's mother, **who was born in Mexico**, is my sister's Spanish teacher.

Catherine

OK. The phrase **who was born in Mexico** is a non-defining relative clause. It doesn't answer the question 'which mother?' because David only has one mother! Instead, the relative clause gives us extra information about David's mother: she was born in Mexico.

Callum

In fact, if we leave the relative clause out entirely, the sentence still makes sense:

Finn

David's mother is my sister's Spanish teacher.

Callum

Now let's look again at relative pronouns. We can use them to refer to the subject or object of a clause. Finn, who is Daniel Radcliffe?

Finn

Daniel Radcliffe is the actor **who** played Harry Potter.

Callum

In this sentence, the relative pronoun **who** refers to the subject – Daniel Radcliffe. Daniel Radcliffe plays Harry Potter.

Catherine

And another question for you Finn. Which sport do you enjoy the most?

Finn

Well, football is the sport **that** I enjoy the most, Catherine.

Callum

This time, the pronoun **that** refers to the object. And you can usually leave out object pronouns, like this:

Finn

Football is the sport I enjoy the most.

IDENT

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Callum

For non-defining clauses, you can't leave out the pronoun. Also, non-defining relative clauses can't begin with the word **that**. Use **which** instead, like this:

Finn

Last year I went to Paris, **which** is the capital of France.

Callum

The clause **which is the capital of France** – is giving us extra information. We can leave it out and still understand the sentence:

Finn

Last year I went to Paris.

Catherine

And now it's time for a quiz. Join these sentences together using a defining or non-defining relative clause. Number one. The bus was very late. I took it this morning. The bus was very late. I took it this morning.

Callum

The bus **that** I took this morning was very late. Or you could also say: The bus I took this morning was very late.

Catherine

You can, very good. Number two: My car needs repairing. I only bought it last month. My car needs repairing. I only bought it last month.

Callum

My car, **which** I only bought last month, needs repairing.

Catherine

And that was a non-defining relative clause. Number three. David Beckham has over 20 tattoos. He used to play for Manchester United. David Beckham has over 20 tattoos. He used to play for Manchester United.

Callum

David Beckham, **who** used to play for Manchester United, has over 20 tattoos.

Catherine

Right. And we could also say: David Beckham, **who** has over 20 tattoos, used to play for Manchester United.

Callum

And that's the end of the quiz. Well done you got them all right. Now for a little tip. In written English, we put commas around non-defining relative clauses. In spoken English, we leave a small pause for each comma. Listen to this example:

Finn

My sister, who works in Nairobi, is a doctor.

Callum

The pauses tell us that this is a non-defining relative clause, which means Finn has only one sister, so he doesn't need to define her.

Finn

My uncle who works in Athens is a dentist.

Catherine

And this time, there's no pause, which means it's a defining relative clause. Finn is defining which uncle he is talking about, so he probably has more than one uncle.

Callum

Thanks Finn. So that's defining and non-defining relative clauses. They start with a relative pronoun and give additional information about the person or thing that you're talking about.

Catherine

There's more about this on our website at bbclearningenglish.com. Join us again for more 6 Minute Grammar.

All:

Bye.