74 Defining relative clauses: persons

A   Subject: **who** or **that**
who is normally used:

> *The man who robbed you has been arrested.*
> *The girls who serve in the shop are the owner's daughters.*
> *Only those who had booked in advance were allowed in.*
> *Would anyone who saw the accident please get in touch with the police?*

But **that** is a possible alternative after **all, everyone, everybody, no one, nobody** and **those**:

> *Everyone who/that knew him liked him.*
> *Nobody who/that watched the match will ever forget it.*

B   Object of a verb: **whom** or **who** or **that**
The object form is **whom**, but this is considered very formal. In spoken English we normally use **who** or **that** (**that** being more usual than **who**), and it is still more common to omit the object pronoun altogether:

> *The man whom I saw told me to come back today* or
> *The man who I saw . . .* or *The man that I saw . . .* or
> *The man I saw . . .* (relative pronoun omitted)
> *The girls whom he employs are always complaining about their pay* or
> *The girls who he employs . . .* or *The girls that he employs . . .* or
> *The girls he employs . . .*

C   With a preposition: **whom** or **that**
In formal English the preposition is placed before the relative pronoun, which must then be put into the form **whom**:

> *the man to whom I spoke*

In informal speech, however, it is more usual to move the preposition to the end of the clause. **whom** then is often replaced by **that**, but it is still more common to omit the relative altogether:

> *the man who/whom I spoke to* or
> *the man that I spoke to* or *the man I spoke to*

Similarly:

> *The man from whom I bought it told me to oil it* or
> *The man who/that I bought it from . . .* or
> *The man I bought it from . . .*
> *The friend with whom I was travelling spoke French* or
> *The friend who/that I was travelling with . . .* or
> *The friend I was travelling with . . .*

D   Possessive
whose is the only possible form:

> *People whose rents have been raised can appeal.*
> *The film is about a spy whose wife betrays him.*

75 Defining relative clauses: things

A   Subject
Either **which** or **that**. **which** is the more formal:

> *This is the picture which/that caused such a sensation.*
> *The stairs which/that lead to the cellar are rather slippery.*

(See also B below.)

B   Object of a verb
which or **that**, or no relative at all:

> *The car which/that I hired broke down* or *The car I hired . . .*

which is hardly ever used after **all, everything, little, much, none, no** and compounds of **no**, or after superlatives. Instead we use **that**, or omit the relative altogether, if it is the object of a verb:

> *All the apples that fall are eaten by the pigs.*
> *This is the best hotel (that) I know.*

C   Object of a preposition
The formal construction is preposition + **which**, but it is more usual to move the preposition to the end of the clause, using **which** or **that** or omitting the relative altogether:

> *The ladder on which I was standing began to slip* or
> *The ladder which/that I was standing on began to slip* or
> *The ladder I was standing on began to slip.*

D   Possessive
whose + a clause is possible but **with** + a phrase is more usual:

> *a house whose walls were made of glass*   *a house with glass walls*

E   Relative adverbs: **when, where, why**
Note that **when** can replace **in/on which** (used of time):

> *the year when* (= in which) *he was born*
> *the day when* (= on which) *they arrived*

where can replace **in/at which** (used of place):

> *the hotel where* (= in/at which) *they were staying*

why can replace **for which**: *The reason why he refused is . . .*
when, where and **why** used in this way are called relative adverbs.

76 Cleft sentences: **it** + **be** + noun/pronoun + defining relative clause

> *It was ¹Tom who helped us.* (not Bill or Jack)
> *It was ¹Ann that I saw.* (not Mary)

When the object is a proper noun, as above, **that** is more usual than **who**. With all other objects, **that** is the correct form:

> *It's the manager that we want to see.*
> *It was wine that we ordered.* (not beer)

that is usual for non-personal subjects:

> *It's speed that causes accidents, not bad roads.*

> **QUICK TIP:** This rule about *because* has no basis in grammar, but it does reflect a small *stylistic* truth. In Lesson 5, we look at a principle of style that tells us to arrange the elements of sentences so that information that readers know comes *before* less familiar information (for a summary, skim pp. 68–70). It is a fact of English style that a SUBORDINATE CLAUSE beginning with *because* usually introduces new information:
>
> ✓ Some writers write graceless prose **because** they are seized by the idea that writing is good only when it's free of errors that only a grammarian can explain.
>
> Reverse that order and you get a mildly awkward sentence:
>
> **Because** some writers are seized by the idea that writing is good only when it's free of errors that only a grammarian can explain, they write graceless prose.
>
> When a *because*-clause introduces new information, as it usually does, it should not begin a sentence, but end it. That, however, is not a rule of grammar but a principle of style.
>
> If you want to *begin* a sentence with a clause expressing familiar information about causation, introduce the clause with *since*, because *since* implies that the reader already knows what is in the clause:
>
> ✓ **Since** our language seems to reflect our quality of mind, it is easy for those inclined to look down on others to think that grammatical "errors" indicate mental or moral deficiency.
>
> There are exceptions to this principle, but it's generally sound.

2. **"Use the RELATIVE PRONOUN *that*—not *which*—for restrictive clauses."** Allegedly, not this:

✓ Next is a typical situation **which** a practiced writer corrects "for style" virtually by reflex action.

—Jacques Barzun, *Simple and Direct* (p. 69)

Yet just a few sentences before, Barzun himself (one of our most eminent intellectual historians and critics of style) had asserted,

Us[e] *that* with defining [i.e. restrictive] clauses except when stylistic reasons interpose.

(In the sentence quoted above, no such reasons interpose.)

This "rule" is relatively new. It appeared in 1906 in Henry and Francis Fowler's *The King's English* (Oxford University Press). The Fowlers thought that the random variation between *that* and *which* to begin a restrictive clause was messy, so they just asserted that henceforth writers should (with some exceptions) limit *which* to *nonrestrictive* clauses.

A nonrestrictive clause, you may recall, modifies a noun naming a referent that you can identify unambiguously without the information in that clause. For example,

✓ ABCO Inc. ended its first bankruptcy, **which** it had filed in 1997.

A company can have only one first bankruptcy, so we can unambiguously identify the bankruptcy without the information in the following clause. We therefore call that clause *nonrestrictive*, because it does not further "restrict" or identify what the noun names. In that context, we put a comma before the modifying clause and begin it with *which*. That rule is based on historical and contemporary usage.

But, claimed the Fowlers, for restrictive clauses we should use not *which* but only *that*: For example,

✓ ABCO Inc. sold a product **that** [*not **which***] made millions.

Since ABCO presumably makes many products, the clause *that made millions* "restricts" the product to the one that made millions, and so, said the Fowlers, it should begin with *that*.

Francis died in 1918, but Henry continued the family tradition with *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (Oxford University Press, 1926), where he made this wistful observation:

Some there are who follow this principle now; but it would be idle to pretend that it is the practice either of most or of the best writers. (p. 635)

I confess I follow Fowler's advice, not because a restrictive *which* is an error, but because *that* has a softer sound. I do sometimes choose a *which* when it's within a word or two of a *that*, because I don't like the sound of two *that*s close together:

✓ We all have **that** one rule **that** we will not give up.

✓ We all have **that** one rule **which** we will not give up.