RELATIVE PRONOUNS

A relative pronoun is "a small group of noun substitutes used to introduce dependent clauses" (Harbrace College Handbook, 11th ed. 571). Relative pronouns may introduce adjective clauses or noun clauses. Relative pronouns are: *that, those, who, whom, whose, which, what, whatever, whoever, whomever, whichever*. (See handout on "Clauses," if necessary.)

**USES IN ADJECTIVE CLAUSES:**

- The relative pronoun *that* may introduce a relative clause used as an adjective. (*Those* is the plural of *that.*)
  
  *Sally bought a car that cost over $30,000.*

- The relative pronouns *that* and *which* replace nouns that refer to things and animals.
  
  *Sally bought a car that is very expensive.*
  
  *Sally's new car, which is green, is very expensive.*

- The relative pronouns *who* and *whom* replace nouns that refer to people. While in spoken English, *that* is sometimes used to refer to people, written English requires the use of *who* or *whom*.
  
  *I know someone who owns a very expensive car.*

- The relative pronoun *whose* refers to people BUT can also refer to things or animals.

  *The salesman, whose name I have forgotten, gave Sally a great deal on her car.*

  *Note*: DO NOT confuse *whose* with *who's* (the contraction for *who is*).

- The relative pronoun *whom* is used only to replace object of verbs or the object of a preposition.

  *Mr. Johnson is the man to whom I sent my application.* (Whom is the object of the preposition *to.*)

**USES IN NOUN CLAUSES:**

*Subject Pronouns.* The following is an example using a relative pronoun as a subject pronoun.

- When combining two sentences, a relative pronoun will most likely replace the subject of the second example:

  *Mary's psychology teacher is Dr. Martin.*
  
  *Dr. Martin has been teaching for 30 years.*

  Combined example:
  
  *Mary's psychology teacher is Dr. Martin, who has been teaching for 30 years.*
Object Pronouns. In the following example, the combined sentence uses a relative pronoun to replace the direct object of the second example below.

- The relative pronoun which replaces the direct object of the second sentence.
  
  We installed an alarm in our car.
  The insurance company requires an alarm to receive the discount.
  
  Combined example:
  We installed an alarm in our car which the insurance company requires to receive the discount.

• COMMON PROBLEMS TO AVOID when using relative pronouns.

- Choose the right form.

  Use that in essential clauses instead of which.
  Essential clause: a clause necessary to complete the sentence's meaning. An essential clause usually identifies the noun or pronoun it modifies by telling which one and cannot be omitted from the sentence. Essential clauses are generally not set off by commas.

  My brother is taking a course that requires research.

  Use which only in nonessential clauses or after a preposition.
  Nonessential clause: a clause unnecessary to complete a sentence's meaning. A nonessential clause usually describes the nouns it modifies, is set off by commas, and may be omitted from the sentence.

  My English class, which is at 8 a.m., is very interesting.

  Use who, whom, and whose as you would use he, him, and his or they, their and theirs. In formal writing if both who and that or both who and which seem possible, use who to refer to people.

- Construct your sentence so that a noun or pronoun is the clear antecedent of the relative pronoun. (The antecedent is the word, phrase or clause to which a relative pronoun refers.)

- Do not punctuate a dependent clause as a complete sentence. When using dependent clauses, remember that the sentence should include an independent clause; otherwise, you will have a fragment. (See handout on "Fragments.")

  Incorrect Examples:
  Which I fixed for dinner. That you bought in the bookstore.
  Whose car is parked on the corner. Who is my oldest brother.

The sentences above are all fragments that can be corrected by adding independent clauses to make complete sentences:
Your recipe for chicken and rice, which I fixed for dinner, is delicious.
The pen that you bought in the bookstore writes well.
The student whose car is parked on the corner has lost his keys.
Let me introduce you to John Nelson, who is my oldest brother.

- Do not use a relative pronoun and a personal pronoun in the same clause to stand for the same antecedent.

  Incorrect Example:
The book that he borrowed it is very difficult to understand.
  book = antecedent  that = relative pronoun  it = personal pronoun

  In the sentence above, that and it refer to book; It is wrong and should be left out:
  The book that he borrowed is very difficult to understand.

- Look at the antecedent of who, that, or which to decide whether the verb following should be singular or plural. (See handout on "Subject-Verb Agreement").

  The man who is coming is my father.
  the antecedent of who is man (singular), so the verb following who must be singular.

  The men who are coming to perform are from my hometown.
  the antecedent of who is men (plural), so the verb following who must be plural.

  The book that is on the table can be sold now.
  the antecedent of that is book (singular), so the verb following that must be singular.

- Do not use which to refer to a whole clause, sentence or paragraph. To write clearly, make sure the relative pronoun clearly refers to its antecedent.

  Ambiguous: The books were standing on the shelves, which needed sorting.
  Clearer: The books, which needed sorting, were standing on the shelves.

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