

## Relative Clauses

The punctuation (comma) in relative clauses is very important for getting your intended meaning across. Unfortunately, many writers don't pay attention to it; even "professional" writers in the *Korea Herald* and *Korea Times* often ignore the punctuation of a relative clause, and this often causes confusion.

### Practical English Usage, by Michael Swan (Oxford)

#### 474. relatives (2): identifying and non-identifying clauses

##### 1. two kinds of relative clause

Some relative clauses identify or classify nouns: they tell us which person or thing, or which kind of person or thing, is meant. (In grammars, these are called 'identifying', 'defining' or 'restrictive' relative clauses.)

*What's the name of the tall man who just came in?*

*Is that your car that's parked outside?*

*Paris is a city I've always wanted to visit.*

*People who take physical exercise live longer.*

*Have you got something that will get ink out of a carpet?*

Other relative clauses do not identify or classify; they simply tell us more about a person or thing that is already identified. (In grammars, these are called 'non-identifying', 'non-defining' or 'non-restrictive' relative clauses.)

*This is Ms Rogers, who's joining the firm next week.*

*In 1908 Ford developed his Model T car, which sold for \$500.*

There are several grammatical differences between the two kinds of relative clause. There are also stylistic differences: non-identifying clauses are generally more formal, and are less frequent in informal speech.

##### 2. pronunciation and punctuation

Identifying relative clauses usually follow immediately after the nouns that they modify, without a break: they are not separated by pauses or intonation movements in speech, or by commas in writing. (This is because the noun would be incomplete without the relative clause, and the sentence would make no sense or have a different meaning.) Non-identifying clauses are normally separated by pauses and or intonation breaks and commas. Compare:

- *The woman who does my hair has moved to another hairdresser's.*  
*Dorothy, who does my hair, has moved to another hairdresser's.*
- *She married a man that she met on a bus.*  
*She married a very nice young architect from Belfast, whom she met on a bus.*

Note how the identifying clauses cannot easily be left out.

*The woman has moved to another hairdresser's.* (Which woman?)

*She married a man.* (!)

When a non-identifying clause does not come at the end of a sentence, two commas are necessary.

*Dorothy, who does my hair, has moved. . .*

(NOT *Dorothy, who does my hair has moved...*)

##### 3. use of *that*

*That* is common as a relative pronoun in identifying clauses. It can refer to things, and in an informal style to people. In non-identifying clauses, *that* is unusual. Compare:

- *Have you got a book that's really easy to read? (OR . . . *which is* . . .)*

*I lent him 'The Old Man and the Sea', which is really easy to read.*

*(NOT I lent him 'The Old Man and the Sea', that is really easy to read.)*

- *Where's the girl that sells the tickets? (OR... who sells...)*  
*This is Naomi, who sells the tickets.*

*(NOT This is Naomi, that sells the tickets.)*

## 8. relative clauses after indefinite noun phrases

The distinction between identifying and non-identifying clauses (see 474) is most clear when they modify definite noun phrases like *the car, this house, my father, Mrs Lewis*. After indefinite noun phrases like *a car, some nurses* or *friends*, the distinction is less clear, and both kinds of clause are often possible with slight differences of emphasis.

*He's got a new car that goes like a bomb.*

*OR He's got a new car, which goes like a bomb.*

*We became friendly with some nurses that John had met in Paris.*

*OR We became friendly with some nurses, whom John had met in Paris.*

In general, 'identifying' clauses are used when the information they give is felt to be centrally important to the overall message. When this is not so, non-identifying clauses are preferred.

## 9. relative pronouns as general-purpose connectors

In non-identifying clauses, the pronouns *who* and *which* sometimes act as general-purpose connecting words, rather like and + pronoun.

*She passed the letter to Moriarty, who passed it on to me.*

*(=... and he passed it on...)*

*I dropped the saucepan, which knocked over the eggs, which went all over the floor. (=... and it knocked... and they went...)*

*I do a lot of walking, which keeps me fit. (=... and this keeps me fit.)*

## 10. relative clauses with indirect statement, etc.

It is often possible to combine relative clauses with indirect statements and similar structures, e.g. *I know / said / feel / hope / wish (that) . . .*, especially in an informal style. Expressions like *I know, I said, etc.*, come after the relative pronoun, if it is not dropped.

*We're going to meet somebody (who/that) I know (that) you'll like.*

*It's a house (which/that) we feel (that) we might want to buy.*

*That's the man (who/that) I wish (that) I'd married.*

Note that the conjunction (the second *that*) is usually dropped in this structure; it must be dropped if the relative pronoun is a subject.

*This is the woman (who/that) Ann said could show us the church.*

*(NOT This is the woman (who/that) Ann said that could show us . . .)*

In this structure, people sometimes use *whom* as a subject pronoun. This is not generally considered correct.

*This is a letter from my father, whom we hope will be out of hospital soon.*

*(More correct: . . . who we hope will be out . . .)*

Relative clauses can also be combined with *if* clauses in sentences like the following.

*I am enclosing an application form, which I should be grateful if you would sign and return.*

## Exercises for Relative Clauses

### Exercise 1

Combine these sentences into one, using a restricted or unrestricted relative clause. After you combine the sentences, compare your combination with your teacher's combination in "Answers, Exercise 2."

1. It's very cloudy. This means that it might rain soon. (*It's very...*)
2. Do you see that cloud? I mean the one that looks like an ice cream cone. (*Do you see...*)
3. I heard the news. By the way, it was announced yesterday. (*I heard...*)
4. I heard the news. I mean the news announced yesterday. (*I heard...*)
5. Some students don't read much. They will not learn English as well as other students. Other students read a lot. (*Students...*)
6. I'm not talking about one girl. (She told me she loves me.) I'm talking about another girl. (She can't stand me.) (*I'm not talking about the girl...*)
7. Mary, this is Bill. He is joining our class next week. (*Mary, this is Bill...*)
8. A school bag is in the teacher's office. Is that your school bag? (*Is that your...*)
9. Paris is a city. I have always wanted to visit Paris. (*Paris is...*)
10. In 1908 Ford developed his Model T car. It sold for \$500. (*In 1908...*)
11. (*To a store clerk*) Have you got something? It gets ink out of a carpet. (*Have you got something...*)
12. My mother was sitting beside me. She whispered in my ear. (*My mother...*)
13. The accident happened at my teacher's house. Many cats were there. (*The accident happened at...*)

## Exercise 2

If there is an error, correct the error (add or delete a comma).

1. South Korea is certain to hold the rotating presidency of the 56<sup>th</sup> U.N. General Assembly, which will open in September next year, government sources said yesterday. ("South Korea holds edge to lead General Assembly," Korea Herald, August 23, 2000.)
2. English teachers in Korea, who are unfamiliar with learning research and who would like a simple introduction designed for the uninitiated, will appreciate Lewis' book. (Margolis, Douglas Paul. 2000. "How to study foreign languages," *The English Connection*, 4/5 (Spring 2000).)

## Answers

### Exercise 1

1. It's very cloudy, which means that it might rain soon.
2. Do you see that cloud that looks like an ice cream cone
3. I heard the news, which was announced yesterday.
4. I heard the news (which was) announced yesterday.
5. Students who don't read much will not learn English as well as students who read a lot.
6. I'm not talking about the girl who told me she loves me, I'm talking about the girl who can't stand me.
7. Mary, this is Bill, who is joining our class next week.
8. Is that your school bag (that is) in the teacher's office?
9. Paris is a city (which) I have always wanted to visit.
10. In 1908 Ford developed his Model T car, which sold for \$500.
11. Have you got something that gets ink out of a carpet?
12. My mother, who was sitting beside me, whispered in my ear.
13. The accident happened at my teacher's house, where there were many cats.

### Exercise 2

1. This is correct. There is only one 56<sup>th</sup> General Assembly; if we used a comma we would be implying the possibility of another 56<sup>th</sup> General Assembly opening on another date.
2. This is incorrect (we hope!), because it implies that all English teachers in Korea are unfamiliar with learning research.