

Relative Pronouns: “Who,” “Which,” and “That”

The main rules for choosing between “who,” “which,” and “that” is **“who” refers to people while “which” and “that” refer to things, but “which” introduces a nonessential description while “that” introduces an essential description.**

More specifically, “who,” “which,” and “that” are all relative pronouns, which means they act as pronouns by replacing a noun but do so to introduce a descriptive or adjectival clause that describes that original noun.

For example, in the following sentence, “who” refers to “the boy” and begins a clause that distinguishes that boy as the one “who sits in the front row.”

- I gave my pencil to the boy who sits in the first row.

“Who, Whose, and Whom”

Anytime you describe a person, you should use **“who”** to introduce that description.

- **Incorrect:** I don’t like people **that** think they’re better than me.
- **Correct:** I don’t like people **who** think they’re better than me.

- **Incorrect:** The kid **that** went to Duke was the first pick in the draft.
- **Correct:** The kid **who** went to Duke was the first pick in the draft.

“Whose” is also the possessive form of “who.”

- I have a friend whose passion is cooking.
- I’m going to the doctor whose office is on Broadway.

And, while “who” are subjects or actors, “whom” are objects or receivers of actions

- My cat, whom I love dearly, is a Turkish Angora.
- I cannot find the email address of the student with whom I promised to meet.

“Which” and “That”

Like “who,” **“which” and “that” also introduce descriptions, but they introduce descriptions of things and not people.**

Also, **“which” introduces a “nonrestrictive clause”** or nonessential description, but **“that” introduces a “restrictive clause”** or an essential description, which means **use “that” to introduce a description without which the sentence would not make sense.**

For example, in the sentences below, one could remove the descriptions introduced by “which” and those sentences would still make sense:

- I bought my car, which was a steal, at the dealership in Pawtucket.

- My professor cancelled class on Friday, which is awesome.

Whereas the following sentences would not make sense if they did not include their descriptions that begin with “that”

- Students often struggle with tests that involve a significant amount of writing.
- I can’t find the sweater that my mom gave me for my birthday.

Without the description of the tests, the first sentence would not be accurate because students may not struggle with tests that do not involve a significant amount of writing. Likewise, the second sentence would also be incomplete without the description of the sweater because the reader would not know exactly which sweater the speaker cannot find.

Also use which in formal writing to avoid ending your sentence with a preposition

- **Incorrect:** Who did you go to the movie with?
- **Correct:** With whom did you go to the movie?

- **Incorrect:** Which store did you buy your shoes at?
- **Correct:** At which store did you buy your shoes?