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English Grammar

Relative (Adjectival) Clauses in English

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1. Introduction

One of the most important ways of expanding information within a sentence is through the use of **relative clauses**, also known as **adjectival clauses**. These clauses enable speakers and writers to provide additional information about a noun without creating separate sentences.

Consider the following examples:

- The student **who won the scholarship** is from Tikrit.
- The book **that I borrowed yesterday** is very useful.
- The professor **whose article was published internationally** received an award.

In each sentence, the highlighted clause modifies a noun and functions similarly to an adjective. Because of this modifying function, such clauses are often called **adjectival clauses**.

Relative clauses are extremely common in academic writing because they allow writers to present detailed information concisely and efficiently.

2. Definition of Relative Clauses

A relative clause is a subordinate clause that modifies a noun or noun phrase in the main clause.

Example

- The woman who teaches syntax is my supervisor.

Main Noun:

- the woman

Relative Clause:

- who teaches syntax

The relative clause identifies and describes the noun.

General Structure

Noun + Relative Clause

Example:

- The researcher who conducted the experiment published the results.

The clause provides additional information about *the researcher*.

3. Characteristics of Relative Clauses

Relative clauses possess several important features.

3.1 They Modify Nouns

Like adjectives, relative clauses describe or identify nouns.

Example:

- The student who answered the question received a prize.

The clause modifies the noun *student*.

3.2 They Are Subordinate Clauses

Relative clauses cannot stand alone as complete sentences.

Incorrect:

- Who answered the question.

Correct:

- The student who answered the question received a prize.

3.3 They Usually Begin with Relative Pronouns

Common relative pronouns include:

- who
- whom
- whose
- which
- that

These elements connect the relative clause to the noun it modifies.

4. Relative Pronouns

Relative pronouns introduce relative clauses and perform grammatical functions within those clauses.

4.1 Who

Used primarily for human antecedents.

Examples

- The student who won the prize is my friend.

- The professor who teaches linguistics is highly respected.

Function:

- Subject of the relative clause.

4.2 Whom

Used primarily for human antecedents when functioning as an object.

Examples

- The student whom I met yesterday is from Basra.
- The researcher whom they invited delivered the keynote speech.

In informal English, *whom* is often replaced by *who*.

4.3 Whose

Expresses possession.

Examples

- The professor whose book was published received an award.
- The student whose project won first place is very talented.

Function:

- Possessive determiner within the relative clause.

4.4 Which

Used mainly for things, animals, and ideas.

Examples

- The book which I bought yesterday is excellent.
- The experiment which produced the best results was repeated.

4.5 That

Can refer to both people and things in defining relative clauses.

Examples

- The student that won the scholarship is from Tikrit.
- The book that I purchased is useful.

In many contexts, *that* is interchangeable with *who* or *which* in defining clauses.

5. Summary

Relative (adjectival) clauses are subordinate clauses that modify nouns and noun phrases. They function similarly to adjectives by providing identifying or descriptive information.

Relative clauses are commonly introduced by:

- who
- whom
- whose
- which
- that

and by relative adverbs such as:

- where
- when
- why

The two major types are:

1. **Defining Relative Clauses** – essential for identifying the noun.
2. **Non-Defining Relative Clauses** – provide additional information and are set off by commas.

Because relative clauses enhance precision, cohesion, and stylistic sophistication, they are indispensable in both academic and professional writing. Mastering their structure and usage is therefore essential for advanced proficiency in English grammar and syntax.