

# Who, what, that, which...

**I.** In this case, "we don't say what it is about" – **the pronoun refers to nothing in the sentence!**  
**Also, there is no comma before the pronoun** (who or what)!

♣ In this meaning, the pronouns **what**, **who (whom)** or **where** and **when** can be used.

For **a person**, **who (whom)**, for **animals** (usually), for **plants** and **things**, **what**, for **places**, **where** and for **times**, **when** is used.

♣ **Such clauses are equivalent to a noun.** In the examples, the clauses are either the subject or object of the sentence:

*Give me what is on the table.*

*What is on the table is mine.*

*Show me where you live.*

*Show me who did this.*

*Tell me when you got home.*

*I didn't know what was wrong with the computer.*

*Show me where you live. – Show me the house.*

*What is on the table is mine. – The book is mine.*

*Show me who did this. – Show me the child.*

*Give me what is on the table. – Give me the cup.*

*Tell me when it happened. – Tell me the time.*

*I didn't know what was wrong with the computer. – I didn't know the problem.*

♣ Be careful! A statement does not start with *who* (except in some rare cases).

In this example, we had to find a different word instead of "who":

~~*Who is here gets a cookie.*~~

*Whoever is here gets a cookie.*

*Anyone who is here gets a cake.*

**II. 1.** Here, the subordinate clause refers to a noun/pronoun before it. Such clauses are called *relative clauses*. In this case, we can call them *defining relative clauses* or *restrictive relative clauses*, because they "define" the noun in front of them—they usually answer question "which". They either define the noun/pronoun precisely, or if not precisely, they at least significantly narrow the range of possibilities.

♣ In this case, **there is no comma before the pronoun!**

♣ The following pronouns can be used here:

for **a person**, **that** and **who (whom)** can be used, and they can sometimes be omitted

(in official English, **whom** is used in the object form, but in colloquial English, **who** is used in this case, too)

for **non-humans**, **that** and **which** are used and can sometimes be omitted

**where** is used for **places** and **when** for **times**.

♣ For a person, **who** sounds better than **that** if followed by a verb! But of course **that** is also perfectly fine.

♣ In these sentences, the subordinate clause defines the noun before it precisely:

*This is the town where I was born.*

*Budapest is the town where I was born.*

*Give me the book which/that is on the table.*

*Dolores is the girl that Pete loves.*

*Jan. 2nd is the day when Al got married.*

*The book which/that is on the table is very expensive.*

*This is the house which/that we live in.*

Where is the book that/which I bought yesterday?

Show me the girl who/that helped you. (*helped* is a verb – here *who* is nicer)

The girl who/that lives next door is Irish. (*lived* is a verb – *who* is more beautiful)

Maca is the girl that/who/whom I love.

This is the girl that/who/whom I work with.

♣ Here, the subordinate clause does not define the noun exactly, but it narrows down the possibilities.

*He is a boy who goes to that school.*

(Many boys go to that school, but **far** fewer than there are boys in the world.)

♣ The pronouns **that**, **who (whom)**, **which** and can be omitted from the sentence **if they are not followed by a verb!**

*This is the house we live in.* (**We** is not a verb.)

*Where is the book I bought yesterday?* (**I** is not a verb.)

*Dolores is the girl Pete loves.* (**Pete** is not a verb.)

*Maca is the girl I love.* (**I** is not a verb.)

*This is the girl I work with.* (**I** is not a verb.)

♣ After a preposition, only use **which** (for animals, plants and things)!

*This is the house **in which** we live.*

After a preposition (in the case of a person) only use **whom!**

*This is the girl **with whom** I work.*

After a preposition **who** is also possible if the question consists of only two words: the preposition and who:

*With who?* (colloquial) = *With whom?* (formal)

*For who?* (colloquial) = *For whom?* (formal)

♣ **Which** (slightly more formal) and **that** are roughly equivalent, but in many cases **which** should not be used, only **that**. For example (these are only some of the more common cases):

After *some..., any..., no..., every...,*

*the superlative of adjectives or an ordinal number.*

Examples (here you can also omit **that** if no verb comes after it):

*Everything that/– you see here is an illusion. = Everything you see here is an illusion.*

*I saw some books here that weren't mine. = I saw some books here that are not mine.*

*I did something that/– I regretted. = I did something that I regret.*

*Nothing that/– he said was true. = Nothing he said was true.*

*She is the prettiest girl that/– I have ever seen. = She is the prettiest girl I have ever seen.*

*car no. 53 was the first car that arrived. = Car number 53 was the first to arrive.*

**You don't need to learn all this, use **that** instead of **which**** (except, of course, after a preposition – see above) **and you won't have a problem!**

♣ When the relative pronoun is the subject and it is followed by some form of **to be**, we can often omit both (this is rare in a negative sentence). I won't give a rule—it's safer not to omit the relative pronoun. You only need to recognize such a structure.

In the examples, I underlined the part that can be omitted:

*I saw a book that/which was lying on the floor. → I saw a book lying on the floor.*

When the relative pronoun is the subject but it is followed by another verb than a form of **to be**, in many cases, the relative pronoun can be omitted like with **to be** (this is also rare in negative sentences). However, in this case, **regardless of the tense, the main verb will be in its –ing form** (and there will be no other verb next to it)! In the examples, I underlined the part that was changed:

*Give me the book that lies on the table. → Give me the book lying on the table.*

*The man who worked hardest was rewarded. → The man working the hardest was rewarded.*

**II. 2.a** Here too, the subordinate clause refers to a noun/pronoun before it. Such clauses are called *relative clauses*. In this case, we can call them *non-defining relative clauses* or *nonrestrictive relative clauses*, because they do not define the noun in front of them (they do not answer the question “which?”), *because we know exactly which one it is even without the relative clause*.

♣ The following pronouns can be used here (as you can see, *that* cannot be used here!):

for **a person, who (whom)**

(in official English, **whom** is used in the object form, but in colloquial English, **who** is used in this case, too)

for **non-humans, which**

**where** for **places** and **when** for **times**.

♣ In this case **there is a comma before the pronoun, or the entire clause is between commas**

*Give me my ID card, which is on the table. (I have one)*

*My car, which is pink, is a very nice car. (I have one car)*

*His mother, who is 100 years old, can swim quite well.*

*Look at Maca, who is the most beautiful girl in the class.*

*I bought my son's present, which was not cheap.*

♣ Only **which** can be used **after a preposition** (similarly to II. 1.).

*This is their garden, in which they grow grass.*

**After a preposition** you can only use **whom** for a person (similarly to II. 1.)!

*This is Hagatha, with whom I work.*

♣ Similarly to II. 1., when the relative pronoun is the subject and it is followed by some form of **to be**, we can often omit both (this is rare in a negative sentence). In the examples, I underlined the changed part:

*Look at Maca, who is the most beautiful girl in the class. → Look at Maca, the most beautiful girl in the class.*

*Look at Maca, who is wearing that beautiful dress. → Look at Maca, wearing that beautiful dress.*

## II. 2.b Here, the subordinate clause refers to a “sentence” (main clause) before it. Only **which** can be used here and it **must be preceded by a comma** (like in point II. 2.a)!

*I had to get up at six o'clock, which was terrible.*

It applies to the whole main clause. (It wasn't o'clock that was terrible!)

*I was an hour late for work yesterday, which made the boss cry.*

(It wasn't yesterday that made the boss cry, but that I was late.)

Let us see a nice example now! (You can see why it is so similar to point II. 2.a)

a) *I lost my mobile phone, which made me angry.*

If it was the loss that made you angry, then it is 2.b.)

b) *I lost my mobile phone, which made me angry.*

If it was the phone that made you angry, then it is 2.a.)

♣ Here, too, we can omit *which* if it is the subject of the sentence and it is followed by a form of **to be** or if the verb after *which* is not a form of **to be** then it is in its *-ing* form regardless of the tense (just like in II.1 and II. 2.a.) Let us see an example:

*More and more cars are stolen, which represents an alarming tendency.*

→ *More and more cars are stolen, representing an alarming tendency.*

## SOME EXTRA STUFF

♣ **Whose** can also be used for inanimate things, either in a defining or non-defining sense!

Examples:

*This is the girl whose father is a millionaire.*

*This is Maca, whose father is a hitman.*

*This is the house whose windows were broken yesterday.*

*This is Joe's house, whose windows were broken yesterday.*

Finally, here are some interesting examples:

♣ *My brother who is a doctor lives in America.* = *My brother, who is a doctor, lives in America.* (one of my many brothers)

*My brother, who is a doctor, lives in America.* = *My brother, who is a doctor, lives in America.* (I only have one brother)

♣ *I dedicate this book to my wife Maca, who helped a lot.* = *I recommend this book to my Maca wife, who helped me a lot.* (No comma before Maca – I'm a polygamist!)

*I dedicate this book to my wife, Maca, who helped a lot.* = *I dedicate this book to my wife, Maca, who helped me a lot.* (There is a comma before Maca – I only have one wife.)