Relative Clauses

Relative clauses are a special type of subordination. They give more information about something (a person, place, thing, or idea) in the main sentence. A relative clause begins with one of the relative pronouns: who (or its other forms, whom and whose), which, that, when, and where. These clauses can be a little trickier than other subordinate clauses because the relative pronoun refers back to the something that the clause is describing and replaces that something within the clauses.

For example:

The man who called last night wouldn’t leave his name.

   To give this information in two sentences, we would have to write,

   A man called last night. The man wouldn’t leave his name.

   Instead, we replace one of the man’s with who to create the relative clause.

The student whose notes I borrowed was absent today.

   Compare this to

   I borrowed a student’s notes. The student was absent today.

   Whose replaces student’s. Note that in this case the word order within the relative clauses needs to be rearranged; we like to put the relative pronoun as early in its clauses as possible.

In the winter there are few hours of daylight, which is why many people feel depressed.

   Here, which refers back to the whole idea expressed in the first part of the sentence.

Note that who (and whose and whom) are used for people; which and that are used for things and ideas. Avoid using that or which for people. Where and when, of course, are for places and times, respectively.

Practice combining ideas using relative clauses by turning each pair of sentences into one:

1. I have a friend. The friend works three jobs to earn money for school.

2. Bob is Susan’s boyfriend. His band will be playing at the party on Saturday.

(over for more)
3. There was a time. At this time people did not lock their doors.

4. The Suzuki method can be very useful for teaching young children. Young children can't read books much less sheet music.

5. I long for a place. In this place I can be alone whenever I want.

6. A person left a jacket at the security checkpoint. Will the person return and claim it?

7. In many parts of the country, citizens are mobilizing against crime and drugs. They are driving drug dealers out of their neighborhoods.

8. According to fashion experts, the crew cut has come back in style. The crew cut was more or less the hallmark of the 1950s.

Try un-combining ideas that use relative clauses. Turn each sentence into two sentences by figuring out what the relative pronoun refers to, and replacing the pronoun with a restatement of that something.

1. There is a man I know who has changed drastically since I have known him.

2. The little boy gave his mother an ashtray that he made at camp.

3. I pledge allegiance to the flag, and to the republic for which it stands.
Why would I want to rewrite my relative clauses as separate sentences?

If you become more aware of how your relative clauses are working, you can avoid some common problems (as well as possibly making more thoughtful choices about your sentence structures).

1) Check to see if your relative clause works. If we can’t identify what a relative pronoun refers back to, or we can’t easily rewrite the sentence as two sentences, the relative pronoun has been used incorrectly. Consider this:

   Bad drivers turn without signaling, which I really hate it when they do that.

2) Check your use of prepositions. Because relative clauses don’t use normal word order, it’s easy to get the wrong preposition, too many of them, etc. Consider this:

   The order of which you do these tasks in does not matter.

   “Which” replaces “order,” so rewrite as

   You do these tasks of order. The order does not matter.

   Is that right?

Check these sentences written by your peers:

1. Teachers prepared us for jobs in which the majority of middle-class citizens have.

2. Most colleges admit more students than they can actually take, which in turn some colleges actually accept less students than they usually would.

3. In the independent study courses, the students can pick any subject in which they are interested in learning more about.

4. In my school each student was entered into a computer where the computer would then discharge that child’s schedule for the upcoming year.

5. We will go into countries that we don’t know where they are.