A relative clause starts with a relative pronoun. A pronoun is a word that replaces a noun previously used in the discussion. Words such as he/she/it or him/her/they/them/we/us are pronouns because they are used to replace a noun previously used in the sentence or another pronoun that was used before them.

Relative clauses replace and explain the noun that precedes or follows them. They open with a relative pronoun: who, which, that, whom or whose.

A relative pronoun explains the noun modified by a relative clause. It introduces a relative clause.

Examples:

- The man who called you is my yoga instructor.
- The girl that called you wants to meet you tomorrow.
- The car which hit the tree was also hit from behind by a truck.
- The girl whom you met there is my roommate.
- The student whose phone rings in class must stand up and apologize.
- My brother whose phone just rang is a geology doctor.

Who, that, and which are subjects of the verb that follows them.

Whom is the object of the verb that comes after it in the sentence.

Whose indicates possession; the noun that precedes it possesses the object that follows it.
Restrictive Relative Clauses

A relative clause is defining when its input is necessary to understand the noun it explains; without it, the noun does not make much sense.

Examples:

- The woman who lives across the street watches my cat when I go on vacation.
- The person whom I called today was my high school teacher.
- The car that hit the cat was red and yellow.
- The school whose Writing Center we are visiting is really impressive.

Restrictive clauses are necessary, so they do not use any punctuation to set them off from the noun they are modifying.

Who is only used for people and replaces subject nouns.

Whom is only used for people and replaces object nouns.

That is used for places, things, and ideas.

Whose is used for people, places, things, and ideas.

Nonrestrictive Relative Clauses

A relative clause is non-defining when it can be deleted without affecting the meaning of the sentence; in this case it should be surrounded by commas.

Examples:

- Ms. Johnson, who is very beautiful, is a smart teacher.
- The plumber, whom I called this morning, is already here!
- The car, which I was driving in my senior year, caught fire on I-35 in Missouri.
- The car, whose driver jumped out before the accident, was completely destroyed.

Nonrestrictive clauses are not necessary, so they are placed within commas to set them off from the noun they are modifying.

Who is only used for people and replaces subject nouns.

Whom is only used for people and replaces object nouns.

Which is used for places, things, and ideas.

Whose is used for people, places, things, and ideas.