

English Corner 7: that and which clauses

The simple rule defining which **personal pronoun** should be used (people **who**, animals **which**, things **that**) only applies to what are usually known as **that clauses**. Better names for them (since not only **that**, but **which** and **who** can also introduce them) are **defining, limiting and restrictive** clauses, since they **define, limit or restrict** in some way the object described. Grammatically they are **relative subordinate adjectival clauses** and they are not separated from the object by a comma. In contrast to **that clauses**, are **which clauses**, better called **non-defining, non-limiting, non-restrictive or descriptive** clauses, since they describe in some way, but do not limit or define, the object. They function grammatically as **relative coordinate main clauses** and are separated from the object by commas.

Defining clauses introduced by *that* and *who*

- In [The microscope **that has a broken lens** needs to be repaired] the word **that** limits the meaning of **microscope** to (defines it as) the one **with a broken lens**. The sentence implies **one** thing: **only** the microscope with the broken lens needs to be repaired.
- In [Students dislike professors **who show favouritism**], the word **who** limits the meaning of **professors** to (defines them as) those **who show favouritism**. It too, implies **one** thing: students dislike **only** the professors who show favouritism.

Defining clauses *not* introduced by *that* or *who*

- In rare cases, **that clauses** are not even introduced by **that** or **who**, but **lack of a comma** indicates that a defining clause is being used. In [Androgens had no effect **as** the doctor claimed], the word **as** limits the meaning of **doctor** to (defines him as) the one claiming that **androgens do have an effect**. This implies only **one** thing: the results do not confirm what the doctor claimed.

Non-defining clauses introduced by *which* and *who*

- In [The microscope, **which has a broken lens**, needs to be repaired], the phrase within the commas can be omitted from the sentence without a change in meaning, as the essence of the statement is [The microscope needs to be repaired], with the phrase within commas merely adding a description of the object. This sentence provides **two** statements [The microscope needs to be repaired] and [The microscope has a broken lens].
- Similarly, in [Students dislike professors, **who show favouritism**], the phrase after the comma can be omitted without a change in meaning, the essence being [Students dislike professors], followed by a description of professors as showing favouritism. It too, provides **two** statements [(all) Students dislike professors] and [(all) Professors show favouritism].

Non-defining clauses *not* introduced by *which* or *who*

- Some **which** clauses need not be introduced by **which** or **who**, but the **presence of a comma** indicates its descriptive nature. In [Androgens had no effect, **as** the doctor claimed], the phrase after the comma can be

omitted without a change in meaning, the essence being [Androgens had no effect]. The sentence provides **two** statements, the result [Androgens had no effect] and an inference [The doctor claimed that androgens **would have no effect**].

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