

Adjective Clauses

An adjective clause is a clause because it has a subject and a verb and an adjective because it describes or modifies a noun. The adjective clause normally gives identifying or background information.

This is the house that Jack built.

Adjective clauses follow the nouns they modify, but they may or may not follow them directly. If the adjective clause is too far in the sentence from the noun it modifies, confusion will result! In general, try to keep the adjective clause next to its noun.

OK: *That is the man over there that I adore .*

good: *That is the man that I adore .*

not good: *That is the man in the pink polka-dotted shirt that I adore .
(does the author adore the man or the shirt?)*

Adjective clauses are formed from main clauses. Here's how it works:

a. If a noun is repeated in two consecutive clauses,

- *The unicorn is a mythical beast.
Many medieval beasts believe in the unicorn .*
- *Unicorns will only eat roses .
Roses are high in Vitamin C.*
- *My Aunt Laverne claimed to have seen a unicorn.
None of us ever believed Aunt Laverne about anything.*

b. first change the noun in the supporting clause (the clause that gives background or identifying information) to the appropriate pronoun,

- *many medieval peasants believe in it*
- *they are high in Vitamin C*
- *none of us ever believed her about anything*

c. then change the pronoun to the appropriate relative pronoun (see chart), and finally, move the relative pronoun to the front of the clause;

- *which many medieval peasants believed in*
- *which are high in Vitamin C*
- *whom none of us ever believed about anything*

d. insert the adjective clause into the first main clause after the noun it modifies, the noun which was originally repeated in both clauses.

- The unicorn, which many medieval peasants believed in, is a mythical beast.
- Unicorns eat only roses, which are high in Vitamin C.
- My Aunt Laverne, whom none of us ever believed about anything, claimed to have seen a unicorn.

So the progression goes like this:

The unicorn is a mythical beast.

Many medieval peasants believe in the unicorn. 🖱

many medieval peasants believe in it. 🖱

[it -which] [which moves to beginning of clause]

which many medieval peasants believe in. 🖱

[the adjective clause comes immediately after the noun it modifies]

The unicorn, which many medieval peasants believe in, is a mythical beast.

Unicorns will only eat roses.

Roses are high in Vitamin C. 🖱

they are high in Vitamin C. 🖱

which are high in Vitamin C. 🖱

Unicorns eat only roses, which are high in Vitamin C.

My Aunt Laverne claimed to have seen a unicorn.

none of us ever believed Aunt Laverne about anything. 🖱

none of us ever believed her about anything. 🖱

whom none of us ever believed about anything. 🖱

My Aunt Laverne, whom none of us ever believed about anything, claimed to have seen a unicorn.

Relative Pronoun	Stands for Pronoun	Stands for
who	he, she, they...	people only, subject of adj. clause
whom	him, her, them...	people only, object of adj. clause
which	it, they, them...	things only
that	he, she, they, him, her them, it...	things or people, restrictive (see below)
whose	his, her, their, its...	possessive, people or things
where	here, there...	nouns of location only (places)
when	then, at that time...	nouns of time only

Some adjective clauses are restrictive or defining; others are non-restrictive or describing. The defining adjective clause tells exactly which person or thing the writer is talking about. Notice that the defining adjective clause is not set off with commas.

I like to drink the brand of coffee that makes my hair stand on end when I have to study late at night.

The describing adjective clause gives background information but does not answer the question, "which one?" This type of adjective clause is set off with commas.

I like to drink Peet's Coffee, which makes my hair stand on end, when I have to study late at night.

Notice that the relative pronoun, that, is used only in defining adjective clauses.

Please note also a tricky point which can make you impress friends and influence people. When the object of a preposition (the noun in a prepositional phrase) is replaced by the relative pronoun, which (thing) or whom (person), the preposition can keep its original place in the clause or it can come just before the relative pronoun at the beginning of the adjective clause.

My friend, Shirley, whom I have long serious discussions with, is a very serious person.

My friend, Shirley, with whom I have long serious discussions, is a very serious person.

Exercise 1: Adjective Clauses

In the sets of sentences below, change each indented sentence into an adjective clause modifying the underlined word in the main sentence.

1. Let me introduce you to my unicorn.

Her name is Sarah.

She eats out of my hand.

I've trained her to do a number of tricks.

I often go on outings with her.

2. The book changed my life.

I read it this past summer.

It is full of useful advice about scuba diving.

Johnny Carson talked about it on his show last Friday.

I gave it to you for Christmas.

3. Mother Goose nursery rhymes are often terribly profound.

They are usually loaded with symbols.

Their symbols are usually obvious in meaning.

Most children are familiar with them.

4. The Doggie Diner is my favorite restaurant.

I eat there every day.

Exercise 2: Creating Adjective Clauses

Add adjective clauses:

1. If I am on vacation, please contact my assistant. (who)
2. Tell the customer to contact me. (who)
3. Yesterday, M. Mouse applied for a job with the company. (who / which)
4. This new form will confuse everybody. (on which)
5. The meeting became exciting. (in which)

Write five sentences, which include the following five "types" of adjective clauses:

- who
- which
- for whom
- whose
- at which

Appositives

Appositives rename, rephrase, say the same thing in a different way. Noun phrases, the most common type of appositives, rename nouns in some way in order to identify, describe, or just get a new angle on something.

My opponent, a wily rascal who could cheat his way out of Sing Sing, does not deserve another term of office.

There are two ways to think of how to structure this kind of appositive. The easiest is simply to note that an appositive is based on a noun which renames the noun it modifies. In the sentence above, “rascal” renames “opponent.” Here’s another way to look at it: In an adjective clause that contains the words “who is” or “which is,” these words (“who is” or “which is”) can be removed.

My opponent, ~~who is a wily rascal who could cheat his way out of Sing Sing,~~ does not deserve another term of office. ➡
My opponent, a wily rascal who could cheat his way out of Sing Sing, does not deserve another term of office.

Exercise 1: Appositives

In the sets of sentences below, change each indented sentence into an appositive modifying part of the main sentence, and indicate where you would place the appositive in the main sentence.

1. Joe Schmoe is the greatest writer of the decade.

He is the author of Bagels for Breakfast and Moonie Madness.

He is a graduate of Vista Community College.

2. Joe’s Diner serves only the best food.

Joe’s Diner is a tiny taco stand in Berkeley.

Joe’s Diner is my favorite little restaurant.

The food is greasy hamburgers and watered down cola.

3. “Return to the Caves Beneath the Planet of the Apes” is featured at the Rialto this week.

It is a classic film of the 70’s.

It is a masterpiece of bad taste.

Add appositives:

1. Mrs. Bumstead has proven herself to be a modern woman.
2. Charles Brown never finishes his assignments on time.
3. Every morning, I watch my favorite television show.
4. My pets always keep me company.
5. I return to my home town every Christmas.