

Using Relative Clauses

Subordinate clauses which begin with a relative pronoun are sometimes called **relative clauses** or **adjective clauses**. **Who, whose, whom, which** and **that** are relative pronouns.

Who, whose and **whom** refer to people.

Which refers to animals and/or things.

That refers to people and/or things.

use a relative clause to give more information about a noun or pronoun.

Because a relative clause appears *immediately after* the noun or pronoun it modifies, it is frequently embedded in the **independent clause**. Study the following examples carefully. The relative clause is in *italics*.

Gough Whitlam, *who is now more than 80 years old*, is an ex-Prime Minister of Australia.

(Gough Whitlam is an ex-Prime Minister of Australia.)

The abstract, *which prefaces many journal articles today*, resembles the aphorism.

(The abstract resembles the aphorism.)

Notice that a comma appears before and after the relative clause. Use a comma before and after a relative clause when the information it provides does not change the overall meaning of the sentence. These clauses are called **non-restrictive clauses**.

Students *who fail to submit assignments by the set date* will be penalised.

(Students will be penalised.)

The fundamental insight *that led to the formulation of the theory of general relativity* is deceptively simple.

(The fundamental insight is deceptively simple.)

In these examples, removal of the relative clause would change the overall meaning of the sentence. Relative clauses essential to the meaning of the sentence are called **restrictive clauses** and commas are not used.

use a relative clause to subordinate one set of facts to another.

Compare the following.

Patrick White, who was born in the Hunter Valley, won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1972.

Patrick White, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1972, was born in the Hunter Valley.

In the first example, White's place of birth is subordinated to his winning of the Nobel Prize. In the second example, his winning of the Nobel Prize is subordinated to his place of birth.

avoid overuse of relative clauses.

Overuse of relative clauses results in wordiness. Many relative clauses can be reduced. This makes the sentence more compact; however, it also changes the emphasis, shifting it away from what was the content of the clause. Compare the following.

The abstract, *which prefaces many journal articles today*, resembles the aphorism.

The abstract *prefacing many journal articles today* resembles the aphorism.

Students *who fail to submit assignments by the set date* will be penalised.

Students *failing to submit assignments by the set date* will be penalised.