

FOCUS ON... defining and non-defining relative clauses

Both defining and non-defining clauses add information to a sentence. They are often introduced by relative pronouns (who, that, which, where) or a possessive relative word (whose). Here are some examples.

Defining relative clauses

Mr Jones is the man **who gave me the job**.
There's the dog **that bit me**!

Non-defining relative clauses

Mr Jones, who is a charming man, started his career in America.
Paul, whose dog bit me yesterday, lives next door.

What's the difference?

- 1 Defining relative clauses give you *essential* information about the preceding noun or pronoun in the sentence. The clauses *define* the person, thing or place you are talking about. Without them, the sentence doesn't make much sense:

Mr Jones is a man.

Mr Jones is the man **who gave me the job**. (**who gave me the job** defines the man that I'm talking about)

There's the dog.

There's the dog **that bit me**. (**that bit me** defines the dog that I'm talking about)

Here's the book.

Here's the book **I wrote last year**. (**I wrote last year** defines the book I'm talking about)

- 2 Non-defining relative clauses give you *extra*, non-essential information about the subject of the sentence:

Mr Jones, **who is a charming man**, started his career in America.

Mr Jones started his career in America.

Extra: Mr Jones is a charming man.

Paul, **whose dog bit me last week**, lives next door.

Paul lives next door.

Extra: Paul has a dog. The dog bit me yesterday.

The book, which took about a year to write, was published by Oxford.

The book was published by Oxford.

Extra: The book took about a year to write.

Non-defining clauses are called 'non-defining' for the very reason that the noun is already defined. You know who Mr Jones is, you know who Paul is, and you know which book I'm talking about. These clauses are just giving you a bit of 'bonus' information.

What else do I need to know?

- 1 Relative pronouns

Who refers to people.

That's the man who invented the mini disc.

Which refers to things.

This video, which will keep you entertained for hours, is available at all good stockists.

That refers to things and people.

Is this the car that you liked so much?

The children that live in my street always look happy.

Use **which**, not **that**, in non-defining relative clauses.

The shop, which is open 24 hours a day, sells just about everything.

~~The shop, that is open 24 hours a day, sells just about everything.~~

- 2 An easy way to spot non-defining relative clauses in texts is to look for commas. Non-defining relative clauses should always be sectioned off from the rest of the sentence with a comma, and often two commas.

I gave my brother ten pounds, which he quickly put in his pocket.

My brother, who won a million on the lottery, is going to live in Italy.

- 3 Non-defining sentences are much more common in written language than they are in speech.