

Relative clauses

A relative clause (also known as an adjectival clause) provides more information about a noun.

Using “which” or “that” in relative clauses

There are two kinds of relative clauses. In order to decide when to use “which” and when to use “that”, you must first decide what kind of relative clause is being used.

‘Essential information’ relative clauses

(known as defining or identifying or restrictive relative clauses)

- these clauses tell you exactly which person or thing is being discussed (i.e. they **identify** the noun)

*e.g. Parks and reserves **which** are controlled by the Christchurch City Council are now being considered as potential sites for cell phone towers.*

In other words, only some of Christchurch's parks and reserves are controlled by the Christchurch City Council, and only those parks and reserves that are controlled by the CCC are being considered potential sites.

- ‘essential information’ clauses have no commas around them
- these clauses cannot be left out of the sentence (without changing the meaning – or confusing the reader)
- these clauses can use ‘that’ instead of ‘who’ or ‘which’

*e.g. Parks and reserves **that** are controlled by the Christchurch City Council are now being considered as potential sites for cell phone towers.*

‘Extra information’ relative clauses

(known as non-defining or non-identifying or non-restrictive relative clauses)

- these clauses simply give us some additional information about the person or thing being discussed (but that information is not essential to the meaning of the sentence).

*e.g. The city's parks and reserves, **which** are controlled by the Christchurch City Council, are now being considered as potential sites for cell phone towers.*

In other words, all the parks and reserves are controlled by the CCC and all are being considered as potential sites.

- these clauses are separated from the main clause of the sentence by commas (because the clause, to some extent, interrupts the sentence) these clauses can be left out of the sentence (without changing the meaning or confusing the reader)
- these clauses cannot use ‘that’ instead of ‘who’ or ‘which’

Writing reduced relative clauses

In academic writing, information tends to be presented in a 'condensed' form. One way of condensing information is to use reduced relative clauses.

1. When the relative pronoun (e.g. *that* or *which*) is the **object** of an *essential information clause*, you can omit the relative pronoun

e.g. The technique **that this study used** was first developed for small firms.

or The technique **this study used** was first developed for small firms.

NB. the object relative pronoun cannot be omitted from an *extra information clause*.

2. When the relative pronoun is the **subject** of an *essential information* or an *extra information* relative clause, you can reduce the clause in several ways:

- If the clause contains the verb "be" plus a phrase, you can omit the relative pronoun and "be":

e.g. Community groups **that are eligible for training incentives** tend to have ...

or Community groups **eligible for training incentives** tend to have ...

- If the clause contains an **active** verb, you can omit the relative pronoun and change the verb to a **present** participle, i.e. an *-ing* form (regardless of the tense of the original verb) :

e.g. There is no evidence that companies **which employ fewer than twenty people** are ...

or There is no evidence that companies **employing fewer than twenty people** are ...

e.g. The four key factors **that affected the adoption of conservation practices** were ...

or The four key factors **affecting the adoption of conservation practices** were ...

- If the clause contains a **passive** verb, you can omit the relative pronoun and change the verb to a **past** participle, i.e. an *-ed* form (regardless of the tense of the original verb) :

e.g. Parks and reserves **that are controlled by the Christchurch City Council** are ...

or Parks and reserves **controlled by the Christchurch City Council** are ...

e.g. The initial study **which was conducted by Wilson (2008)** showed ...

or The initial study **conducted by Wilson (2008)** showed ...

e.g. The Ferguson model, **which is regarded as the best alternative for rural communities**, has been

or The Ferguson model, **regarded as the best alternative for rural communities**, has been

More resources

If you would like to know more about how to using relative clauses, or to brush up on some of the terminology in this handout

- check out our resources on [Writing clearly and logically](#) and [Polishing your writing](#).
- or talk to one of the Learning Advisors in Academic Success (academicsuccess@lincoln.ac.nz)