

Using non-defining relative clauses

ADRIAN DOFF presents and explains this key point of grammar with notes on a short dialogue.

MEDIUM PLUS

Dialogue

Chris is a guest on a chat show.

Host (Moderator(in)):

Today, we're going to meet some people **who have interesting stories about cats**¹. My first guest is Chris Gray, **who has a story from his holiday in Switzerland**².

Chris: Yes, I was staying in Gimmelwald, **which is a village in the Swiss Alps**³, **where I go walking every year**⁴. One day, I got lost. I couldn't find the path, and it was getting dark. Then I saw a black-and-white cat, **which I knew from the village**⁵. It was a cat called Susi, **whose owners lived in the village**⁶. The cat started walking along a narrow path, and it kept looking round at me, so I followed it. And it led me back to the village.

Host: The cat rescued you, then?

Chris: Yes, it rescued me, **which sounds incredible**⁷, but it's true.

Explanations

- This is a **defining relative clause**, introduced by the **relative pronoun "who"** (to refer to a person). It defines which people the speaker means (= people who have interesting cat stories).
- This is a **non-defining relative clause** also introduced by **"who"**. Here, though, it doesn't define Chris Gray. It simply gives us **extra information** about him. (He has a story from his holiday.)
- Here we have another **non-defining relative clause**. It is introduced by the **relative pronoun "which"** and gives us more information about the village of Gimmelwald in Switzerland.
- This is a **non-defining relative clause**, introduced by the **relative pronoun "where"**. (= I go walking there.)
- In this **non-defining relative clause** with **"which"** (= the cat), the cat is the **object** of the clause. (= I knew the cat.)
- This **non-defining relative clause** is introduced by a **possessive pronoun, "whose"** (= the cat's owners).
- Here, **which** refers to a **complete idea** (= the fact that the cat rescued Chris).

Remember

There are two types of relative clause:

- defining relative clauses**, which **define** the person or thing one is talking about. In defining relative clauses, no comma is used ("people who...", not "people, who..."):
 - Kate likes people *who laugh a lot*. (This tells us which people she likes.)
- non-defining relative clauses**, which add **extra information**. In non-defining relative clauses, a comma is used ("John, who..." not "John who..."):
 - She's married to John, who is a doctor*. (This tells us more about John.)

In non-defining relative clauses, use **who, which, where** or **whose**.

Beyond the basics

Non-defining relative clauses are usually used in:

- more formal style. Compare:
 - This is Sue. *She's the new receptionist*. (informal)
 - I'd like to introduce you to Susan Phelps, *who is our new receptionist*. (more formal)
- longer explanations or stories (as in the chat show). These clauses help one to organize the information clearly.

Exercise 1

M

Write the correct relative pronoun in each space (Lücke) below.

- This is the Tower of London, _____ was built in 1087.
- This is a picture of Heidelberg, _____ I went to university.
- I shouted at her, _____ wasn't a very good idea.
- I was talking to Richard, _____ you met at the party.
- My friend Moji, _____ real name is Mojnan, is from Iran.

Answers

- which
- where
- which
- who(m)
- whose