

Relative clauses

English B1

What this topic teaches

How do you attach a description to a noun? With a **relative clause** – a small sentence inside the big one, glued on with *who*, *which*, *that*, *where* or *whose*.

- *The girl **who lives next door** is my friend.*
- *The book **that I bought** is about pandas.*
- Chinese puts the description **before** the noun: . English puts it **after**: *the book that I like*. The description flips sides – the single biggest word-order difference between the two languages.
- Memory hook: English nouns wear their descriptions **behind** them, like a backpack . Chinese nouns wear them in front, like a face.

The glue words

Glue	For	Example
who	people	the teacher who teaches us
which	things	the pen which is on the desk
that	people or things	the film that we watched
where	places	the shop where I bought it
whose	possession	the boy whose dog is famous

- *that* can replace *who* or *which* in defining clauses: *the girl that lives next door*. Friendly and common.
- *whose* works for things too: *a book whose pages are missing*. English is generous here.
- The clause has its own verb, so one English sentence can carry two: *The girl [who lives next door] **is** my friend*. Two verbs, one sentence, no comma at this level.

Dropping the glue

When the glue word is the **object** of the small sentence, you can drop it.

- *The book (that) I bought is about pandas*. – *that* is the object of *bought* (I bought **it**), so it can vanish.
- *The teacher (who) we met was kind*. – dropped, and the sentence still stands.
- △ But never drop it when it is the **subject**: “*The girl lives next door is my friend*” × – two verbs collide with no glue. *The girl **who** lives next door...*

Watch out: traps for Chinese speakers

- △ **The flip**. The Chinese description comes first; English puts it after the noun. Direct translation produces “*I like’s book*” energy – always move the description behind the noun.
- △ **No double duty**. “*The book that I bought **it** is about pandas*” × – *that* already carries the object job. The *it* is a spare part; throw it away.
- △ **The clause borrows no tense of its own**. It follows the time inside it: *the girl who **lives** next door* (now), *the film that we **watched*** (then). The big sentence’s tense and the clause’s tense are independent.
- △ **No comma, no *which* for people**. “*The man which called*” × → *who/that*. *which* serves things; people take *who*.

Say it aloud

Describe your world with one relative clause per noun. It is surprisingly fun.

- The teacher who teaches us English is patient. The patience which she has is legendary .
- The shop where I buy noodles is the shop whose owner knows my order. That is love.
- The homework (that) I finished yesterday is the homework that nobody can find today. Classic.

Check yourself

Answer first, then read the explanation.

1. *The girl ____ lives next door is my friend*. – **who/that**. A person, subject position: the glue cannot be dropped.
2. *The book ____ I bought is about pandas*. – **that/which**, or nothing. Object position: the glue may vanish.
3. *The shop ____ I bought it is near school*. – **where**. A place.
4. “*The boy which dog is famous*” – × → **whose**. Possession takes *whose*.
5. *Wǒ xīhuan de shū – the book (that) I like*. Description flips behind the noun.