

Relative clauses (defining and non-defining)

English B2

What this topic teaches

B1 gave you the relative clause: *the girl who lives next door*. B2 adds the comma question – the difference between **defining** and **non-defining** clauses. One comma, two meanings.

- Defining (no commas): the clause **identifies** which one. *The students **who studied** passed.* – only the studiers.
- Non-defining (commas): the clause **adds extra information** about a noun that is already identified. *My father*, who never studied,** passed.** – we already know which person; the clause is a comment.
- Memory hook: commas are **brackets of love**. They hug information that could be deleted. No commas = the information is doing identification work.

Defining: the identifying clause

No commas. The noun needs the clause; without it, we don't know which one.

- *The book **that I bought yesterday** is missing.* – which book? that one.
- *Students **who revise** do better.* – which students? the revisers.
- *that* is welcome here, and the glue can be dropped in object position: *the book (that) I bought.*
- Δ Removing a defining clause breaks the sentence's identity: *The book is missing.* – which book?? The library has questions.

Non-defining: the bonus information

With commas. The noun is already identified; the clause is a comment you could delete.

- *My bike*, which is very old,** was stolen.** – you know my bike; the age is a bonus.
- *Chengdu*, where I ate hotpot every day,** is my favourite city.**
- *Our head teacher*, whose patience is legendary,** announced a holiday.**
- Δ **that is banned here**: “*My bike, that is very old, was stolen*” $\times$. Non-defining clauses take *who*, *which*, *where*, *whose* – never *that*, and the glue can never be dropped.

The meaning flip

Defining (no commas)	Non-defining (commas)
My brother who lives in Beijing is a doctor. (I have several brothers; the clause picks out the Beijing one.)	My brother**, who lives in Beijing,** is a doctor. (The commas signal: you can already tell which brother I mean – often, but not always, because I have only one. Beijing is a bonus.)
The students who studied passed. (the others didn't)	The students**, who studied,** passed. (all of them; they studied, by the way)

- The commas say *already identified* – they do not **prove** there is only one. *My brother, who lives in Beijing, is a doctor; my other brother, the Shanghai one, is a nurse.* is fine English. Identified by the commas, not counted by them. Use the comma decision with the respect it deserves.

Watch out: traps for Chinese speakers

- $\triangle$ **Chinese has no comma machinery here.** is just “my Beijing-living brother”; whether the listener already knows which one stays hidden. English makes you choose: identifying (no commas) or bonus (commas).
- $\triangle$ **Don't drop the glue in a non-defining clause.** “*My bike, is very old, was stolen*” $\times$ – the glue is the subject: *My bike, **which** is very old, was stolen.*
- $\triangle$ **whose loves both types:** *the boy whose dog is famous* (defining) / *Li, whose dog is famous, sits beside me* (non-defining).
- $\triangle$ **A comma pair needs both commas.** “*My bike, which is very old was stolen*” $\times$ – one comma is a bracket left open; the sentence leaks.

Say it aloud

Describe your life with both clause types. Choose commas by what the listener already knows.

- The noodles **that I eat every day** are cheap. (Defining: the daily ones. The expensive ones remain uneaten.)
- My cat, who has never paid rent , was sleeping on my homework. (You already know which cat; the rent comment is a bonus.)
- The exam, which nobody feared, is on Monday. – commas work when the listener can already tell which exam. If not: *the exam that nobody feared* – and the feared one is also on Monday. Sorry.

Check yourself

Answer first, then read the explanation.

1. *The students who studied passed.* – **defining**: only the students passed. No commas.
2. *My father, who never studied, passed.* – **non-defining**: the father is already identified; the clause is a comment.
3. *“My bike, that is very old, was stolen.”* – $\times \rightarrow$ **which**. *that* is banned from non-defining clauses.
4. *Chengdu, _____ I ate hotpot every day, is my favourite city.* – **where**. A place, bonus information.
5. *The book (that) I bought is missing.* – **defining, glue droppable**: it identifies which book.