

English B2 · Relative clauses: defining and non-defining

Upper-intermediate English for Chinese speakers; classroom examples, not official exam items.

The brackets of love

Commas are brackets of love: they hug information that could be deleted. No commas means the clause is doing identification work.

The identifying clause

No commas; no deleting

The book that I bought yesterday is missing.

Students who revise do better.

The bonus information

With commas; deletable

My bike, which is very old, was stolen.

Chengdu, where I ate hotpot every day, is my favourite city.

Our head teacher, whose patience is legendary, announced a holiday.

Your turn: which glue word

Your turn

My bike, ____ is very old, was stolen.

- A. that
- B. which
- C. nothing — drop the glue
- D. what

The meaning flip

defining — no commas

My brother who lives in Beijing is a doctor.

I have several brothers; this is the Beijing one.

non-defining — commas

My brother, who lives in Beijing, is a doctor.

Already identified — often the only one; Beijing is a bonus.

Your turn: what the commas say

Your turn

"My brother, who lives in Beijing, is a doctor." — what do the commas tell the listener?

- A. The speaker has several brothers.
- B. The commas guarantee there is only one brother.
- C. None; it is a metaphor.
- D. The listener can already tell which brother — often the only one, but not guaranteed.

The four guards

The trap

My bike, is very old, was stolen.

My bike, which is very old was stolen.

My bike, that is very old...

the Beijing brother, hiding the count

The fix

My bike, which is very old, was stolen. — glue required.

Close the pair: ...very old, was stolen.

which, never that, in a non-defining clause.

English declares the count with commas.

Say it aloud

Define: The noodles that I eat every day are cheap.



Comment: My cat, who has never paid rent, was sleeping on my homework.



Declare: The exam, which nobody feared, is on Monday. — when the listener knows which exam.



If not: the exam that nobody feared is on Monday. The feared one is too. Sorry.

Check yourself

- The students who studied passed — defining: only the students.
- My father, who never studied, passed — non-defining: already identified.
- My bike, which is very old, was stolen — which, never that, both commas.
- The book (that) I bought is missing — defining; the glue may vanish.