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## CHAPTER 12 : RELATIVE CLAUSES

### SYNTAX

When you want to point out your father in a group of men, you might say, “The man who is wearing the overalls is my father.” Or perhaps you want to help a friend decide whether to take math from Mr. Young: “Mr. Young, who is a very good teacher, gives very few A’s.” In both cases, you are using relative clauses. The relative clause is used as an adjective and is sometimes called an adjective clause. The name relative clause comes from the word which introduces the clause; it is called a relative pronoun, and it usually relates to or refers to the noun which comes right before it in a sentence.

The relative pronouns are *who*, *whom*, *which*, and *that*. All forms of *who* are used to refer to people or to domestic animals who seem almost like people to us. We will talk about the use of *whose* later in this chapter when we talk about its functioning as an adjective beginning a relative clause; we will also talk more about the use of *that* later in the chapter when we discuss restrictive and nonrestrictive clauses.

#### Relative Pronoun as Subject

Now let us see how relative clauses are created and how they work in a sentence. We said above that the relative pronoun which begins a relative clause refers to a noun which comes immediately before it. We already know that a pronoun also refers to a noun which comes before it; the difference is that the pronoun does not make a dependent clause, but the relative pronoun does. Notice the movement from noun to pronoun to relative pronoun in the following sentences.

Joseph led the band of Nez Perce. **The band** lived in the Wallowas.

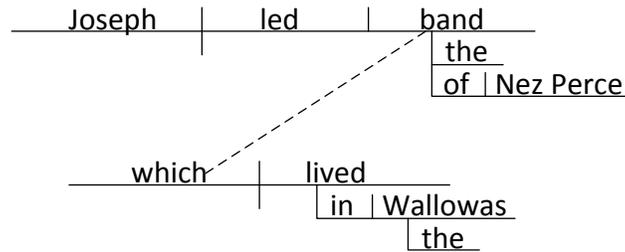
Joseph led the band of Nez Perce. **It** lived in the Wallowas.

Joseph led the band of Nez Perce **which** lived in the Wallowas.

You may have noticed in this sentence that *which* refers to *band*, not to *Nez Perce*. Even though the general rule is that the relative pronoun refers to the noun which comes immediately before it, prepositional phrases beginning with *of* change that rule. When the prepositional phrase begins with *of*, the relative pronoun will refer to the noun modified by the *of* phrase. Other prepositions like *in* and *at* that sometimes work the same way.

You probably also noticed that in the sentences above, the relative pronoun was the subject of the dependent clause just as *band* and *it* were subjects in their sentences. When the relative pronoun serves as the subject of the clause, the sentence is diagrammed as follows; note that a dotted line connects the relative pronoun to the noun that it refers to:

Joseph led the band of Nez Perce which lived in the Wallows.



### Relative Pronoun as Direct Object

The relative pronoun is not limited to being used as a subject in a dependent clause. It can also be used in other ways in which nouns are used. The most obvious use is as a direct object.

General Howard finally defeated the Nez Perce. He admired the **Nez Perce** greatly.

General Howard finally defeated the Nez Perce. He admired **them** greatly.

ØGeneral Howard finally defeated the Nez Perce he admired **whom** greatly.

General Howard finally defeated the Nez Perce **whom** he admired greatly.

Here the word repeated in the first set of sentences is *Nez Perce*. *Nez Perce* is the object of the second sentence, so it is replaced by *them*, the object form of *they*, in the second set of sentences. In the third set of sentences, *them* is replaced by *whom*, the object form of *who*. However, this sentence does not yet follow the rules of English syntax. Another change or transformation needs to be made so that the clause can begin with the relative pronoun. This means that in a relative clause, the direct object will come before, not after, the subject and verb. This sentence is diagrammed as follows:



### Relative Pronoun as Object of Preposition

The relative pronoun can also be used as the object of a preposition.

The Wallows are snow-capped peaks until midsummer. Joseph's band of Nez Perce spent their summers **in the Wallows**.

The Wallowas are snow-capped peaks until midsummer. Joseph's band of Nez Perce spent their summers **in them**.

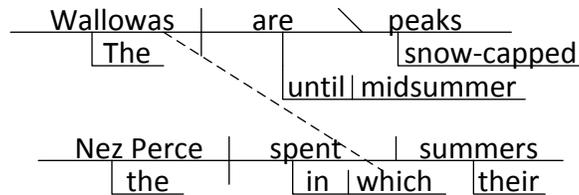
∅The Wallowas are snow-capped peaks until midsummer Joseph's band of Nez Perce spent their summers **in which**.

The Wallowas, **which** the Nez Perce spent their summers **in**, are snow-capped peaks until midsummer.

The Wallowas, **in which** the Nez Perce spent their summers, are snow-capped peaks until midsummer.

Notice that again the relative pronoun must move from its position at the end of the prepositional phrase to the beginning of the relative clause. The last sentence above indicates that it is also acceptable syntax to move the whole prepositional phrase to the beginning of the clause; in this case, the clause actually begins with the preposition, not with the relative pronoun. In written English, moving the preposition as well as the relative pronoun so that the clause or the sentence do not end in a preposition is generally preferred. However, it is not wrong to end a sentence with a preposition; in fact, ending a sentence with a preposition is sometimes preferable to a wordy repetition.

The last two sentences above are diagrammed the same way; the structure of each is the same even though the surface looks a little different:



### The Relative Pronoun Omitted

It is fairly common, especially in spoken English, to omit the relative pronoun when it is in the object position in the relative clause. Even though it is omitted, the language-processing areas of the brain understand that it is functioning in the sentence; otherwise, the brain would understand the sentence as ungrammatical—some strange medley of words with a sentence thrown into the middle of another sentence. It is not possible to omit the relative pronoun when it serves as the subject of its clause.

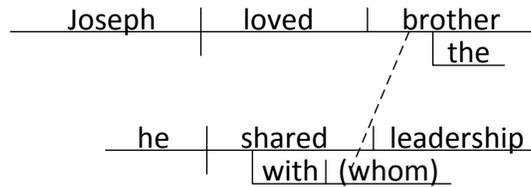
Joseph loved the brother (**whom**) he shared leadership with.

Joseph prepared the women and children (**whom**) he led for flight.

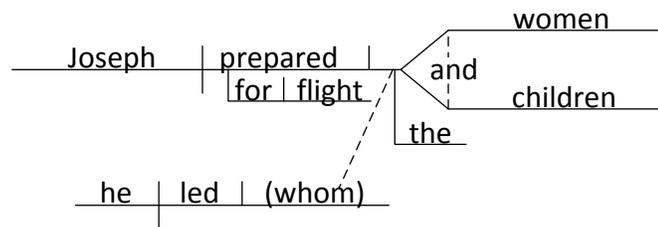
Joseph, **who** was a powerful leader at treaty councils, was not the warrior chief of his band.

When diagramming sentences which omit the relative pronoun, put the omitted pronoun in parentheses in its proper place on the diagram.

Joseph loved the brother he shared leadership with.



Joseph prepared the women and children he led for flight.



### As as a Relative Pronoun

Usually *as* serves to introduce adverb clauses, but *as* can also sometimes be used as a relative pronoun. Notice the following pairs.

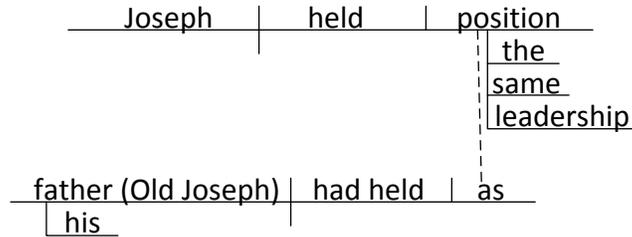
Those Nez Perce **who** had become Protestant Christians agreed to sign the treaty.

Such Nez Perce **as** had become Protestant Christians agreed to sign the treaty.

Joseph held the same leadership position **that** his father, Old Joseph, had held.

Joseph held the same leadership position **as** his father, Old Joseph, had held.

In both of these pairs, it is clear that in the second sentences *as* functions exactly as *who* and *that* function in the first sentences. It is therefore functioning as a relative pronoun. This use of *as* is a clear pattern in modern English, and it is usually used in conjunction with *such* or *same* as it is above. Because *as* is functioning as a relative pronoun in these sentences, it is diagrammed just as *who*, *which*, and *that* are diagrammed.



### Whose Introducing Relative Clauses

*Whose*, the possessive form of *who*, is used to introduce relative clauses when the word whose place in the clause it is taking would be a possessive. This means that *whose* functions as an adjective, just as all possessives function as adjectives, and it is sometimes called a relative adjective.

Ollokot was the warrior leader of Joseph's band. **Ollokot's** fighting skills were well known.

Ollokot was the warrior leader of Joseph's band. **His** fighting skills were well known.

ØOllokot was the warrior leader of Joseph's band **whose** fighting skills were well known.

Ollokot, **whose** fighting skills were well known, was the warrior leader of Joseph's band.

Notice that the clause must be moved to be immediately after the word that the possessive *whose* refers to. We cannot emphasize enough that the relative clause must come immediately after the noun that it refers to with the exceptions already noted. In the next to last sentence above, the reader will not know how to interpret the error: Is it Ollokot or Joseph whose fighting skills were well known?

Because *which* and *that* do not have an object form, *whose* is also used to refer to things when a possessive is needed:

The building **whose** windows were broken in the riot has not reopened.

Some people feel that *whose* like *who* should refer only to people and so object to this use of *whose*. However the structures that must be used to avoid referring to things with *whose* are generally considered unnecessarily awkward and stuffy today:

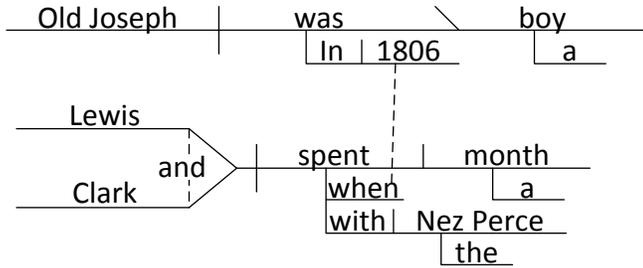
The building the windows **of which** were broken in the riot has not reopened.

Because *whose* functions as an adjective in its own clause, it is diagrammed as an adjective below the noun which it modifies. A dotted line connects it to the word in the base sentence that it refers to.

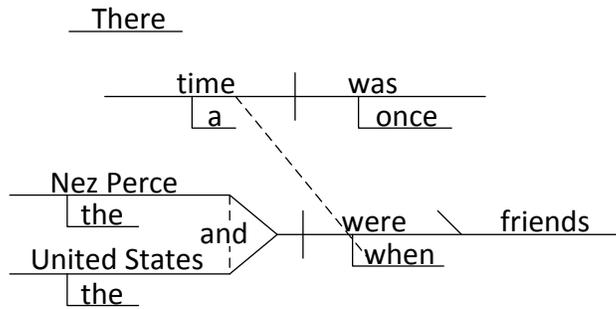


All of these clauses are very close to adverb clauses, and if the noun which they refer to were not in the sentence, they would function as adverb clauses. However, when there is a noun for them to refer to, they function as relative clauses and are diagrammed as such. The relative adverb functions as an adverb within its own clause:

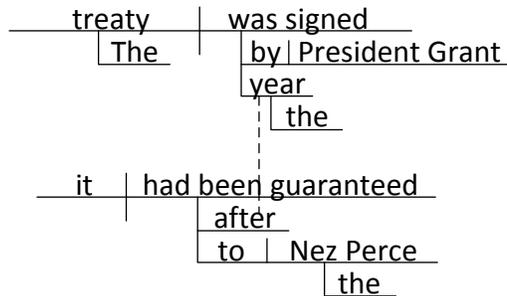
In 1806, when Lewis and Clark spent a month with the Nez Perce, Old Joseph was a boy.



There was once a time when the Nez Perce and the United States were friends.



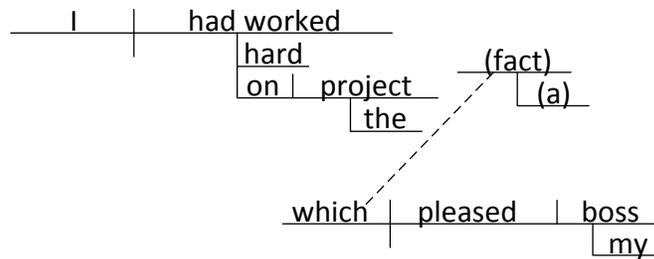
The treaty was signed by President Grant the year after it had been guaranteed to the Nez Perce.



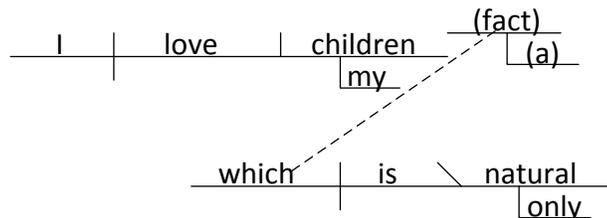
**Which Referring to the Entire Base Sentence**

Sometimes, *which* can successfully be used to refer not to a single word immediately before it, but to the meaning of the entire base sentence. In this use of *which* to introduce a relative clause, there seems to be an implied *a fact* which the relative pronoun refers to. This implied antecedent is indicated in the diagram for the sentence.

I had worked hard on the project, **which** pleased my boss.



I love my children, **which** is only natural.



In written English, one should be careful that *a fact* could be inserted and that the *which* cannot seem to refer to the word that it comes immediately after. Clearly in the following sentence, the relative clause does not work.

ØI walked to town yesterday, which was the first time this year.

**Placement of Relative Clauses**

One more time, we want to emphasize the need in written English especially to be sure that the relative pronoun refers unmistakably to its antecedent noun. Most of the time, this means that the relative clause comes immediately after the noun to which it refers. Sometimes it will be necessary to move an adverb modifier to be sure that the placement is correct; sometimes it may be necessary to use another dependent or even independent clause. What may seem like wordiness is far preferable to something like the following:

ØCharlie Chaplin gets caught in a machine designed to feed workers automatically which malfunctions.

Far better to say:

Charlie Chaplin gets caught in a malfunctioning machine which was designed to feed workers automatically.

## Punctuation

The hardest part of relative clauses is their punctuation, which is based on the distinction between **restrictive** and **nonrestrictive** modifiers (see figure 12.1). However, with some definitions and a little thought, you will find that the punctuation is not all that difficult.

12.1 Punctuating Relative Clauses
<p>Restrictive relative clauses are not punctuated. Snow White bit into the apple <b>that</b> the wicked queen gave her.</p>
<p>Nonrestrictive relative clauses are set off by commas. Granny Smith apples, which are grown all over the world, were originally cultivated in New Zealand.</p>

When we speak we use timing and pitch almost automatically to distinguish between restrictive and nonrestrictive clauses, but when we write we must use punctuation to make the distinction. The rule is that restrictive clauses are not set off with commas, and nonrestrictive clauses are. The rule is easy enough to say, but what does it mean? Let us look at some examples.

Interstate 5, **which cuts Seattle in half**, was built in 1962.

The street **which runs in front of my house** needs repaving once a month.

In the first sentence, we do not need the information in the relative clause to tell us which Interstate 5 cuts Seattle in half because there is only one Interstate 5 in Seattle, so the clause is nonrestrictive; it comments on the word that it modifies. In the second sentence, we do need the information about the street running in front of my house to identify which street we mean because innumerable streets might need repaving once a month, so the clause is restrictive; it distinguishes the word that it modifies from similar things it might be referring to, in this case the other streets that do not run in front of my house.

Here is another pair.

People **who live in Los Angeles** must breathe polluted air.

People, **who must breathe air**, have no choice but to breathe polluted air when they live in Los Angeles.

In the first sentence, we need the information about exactly which people we are talking about; not all people must breathe polluted air. Thus, the relative clause in the first sentence is restrictive. In the second sentence, the information that people must breathe air is not necessary to tell us which people we are talking about; all people must breathe air. The information is in the sentence for emphasis. The relative clause in the second sentence is nonrestrictive. It might be helpful to think about how you would say the two sentences and note the differences between restrictive and nonrestrictive in spoken English.

Here is one last pair.

My sister **who lives in San Francisco** is a nurse.

My sister, **who lives in San Francisco**, is a nurse.

In the first sentence, I have more than one sister, so the information is necessary to indicate which sister I mean; the relative clause is restrictive. In the second sentence, I have only one sister, so the information about where she lives is extra, unnecessary for determining which sister I mean; the clause is nonrestrictive.

Notice that proper nouns are almost always modified by nonrestrictive clauses because the proper noun names a specific person, place, or thing; therefore we know which person, place, or thing we are referring to. The only exception to this occurs when there are two persons, places, or things with the same name and there is a possible confusion about which one we are referring to. In this case, the noun is preceded by *the*.

*The* Julie **who (or that) sits in the front row** is my sister.

*The* Columbus **that (or which) is in Ohio** is the home of The Ohio State University.

Another piece of information is important here. When introducing a relative clause, *that* is used to introduce restrictive clauses only. In other words, relative clauses beginning with *that* will never be set off with commas. As difficult as the punctuation rules for restrictive and nonrestrictive clauses may seem because of the difficulty of determining whether the clause is restrictive or nonrestrictive, most native speakers of English use *that* correctly to begin only restrictive clauses, and that has been going on since Anglo-Saxon times.

Some editors and English teachers consider the use of *which* to begin restrictive clauses an error. This is one of the usage conventions we mentioned in chapter 1. The historical record of the written language is full of examples of *which* used with restrictive clauses, but the prejudice against it remains strong.

Finally, relative clauses that modify the whole sentence are always set off with a comma, perhaps because they are in some way nonrestrictive or perhaps because of the timing and pitch change when the clauses are spoken. The punctuation here is a

reminder that punctuation follows syntax, but it is also a matter of convention for the written language.

You should also note that the same restrictive/nonrestrictive rule applies to appositive nouns (chapter 3) and to participle phrases (chapter 15) that come after the nouns they modify.

### 12.2 Restrictive and Nonrestrictive Modifiers

*Restrictive:* The information in the relative clause is necessary to distinguish the noun that it modifies from all similar things to which the noun might be referring.

The Native American tribes that live in Washington State won a major victory in the Boldt Decision.

*Nonrestrictive:* The information in the relative clause is not necessary to distinguish the noun because this is already clear.

The city of Spokane, which is located on the Spokane River in eastern Washington State, is named after a Native American tribe.

## RHETORIC

### How to Use Relative Clauses Effectively

#### 1. Maintain Paragraph Flow and Focus

Relative clauses are particularly useful for adding to a sentence pertinent, helpful, and even necessary information that would interrupt the flow and focus of a paragraph and/or cause unhelpful repetition if it were in a separate sentence.

Leon climbed Mt. Si when he was five. Mt. Si is near Seattle, Washington. On his twelfth birthday he climbed Mt. Rainier.

Leon climbed Mt. Si, **which is near Seattle, Washington**, when he was five. On his twelfth birthday he climbed Mt. Rainier.

When we use relative clauses for this kind of information, it is important to keep the information that is the main focus of the sentence, and therefore of the paragraph, in the independent clause; the information needing less emphasis goes in the dependent relative clause. In the next sentences, the focus changes when the information changes from dependent to independent clause.

Arnold Schwarzenegger, **who always dreamed of being a rich American and living in California**, was born in a small town in Austria.

Arnold Schwarzenegger, **who was born in a small town in Austria**, always dreamed of being a rich American and living in California.

The first sentence emphasizes where Schwarzenegger was born. We expect it to be followed by further information about the town and Schwarzenegger's life there. The second sentence emphasizes Schwarzenegger's dream, and we expect it to be followed by further information about the dream.

Here is another example of keeping the focus with a relative clause.

The tragedy **that brought her life to an end** was only the final tragedy in a life of tragedies.

Usually this is more effective than using two separate sentences.

A tragedy brought her life to an end. It was the final tragedy in a life of tragedies.

## 2. Create Coordination and Parallelism

Relative clauses may be used in a series to add information that needs more than one verb phrase or even to add emphasis when the same verb phrase is used.

A man **who is kind, who is honest, and who makes a good living** is already taken.

Relative clauses may also be used to make balanced sentences; when the meaning implies a balance, the sentence structure can reinforce that balance.

Sometimes the person **that we date** is not the same person **that we marry**.

## EXERCISES

### A. Sentences to Diagram

*Relative Pronouns:*

1. In the old bathtub, which had been left in the front yard, Nadine planted petunias and alyssum, which she watered all summer with leftover dish water.
2. The man to whom you gave the ticket was not very grateful.
3. I gave my piece of watermelon to the girl you were sitting beside earlier today.
4. The fence that Fritz is building will be finished by next spring if the winter is not too wet.
5. The balloon that you gave me for my birthday is still full of helium.
6. Jeremy, who has not danced in years, left his wife for a dancer.
7. The windows that I washed yesterday will be dirty again soon.

8. Near the ramp stood a man who looked very familiar to me.
9. This summer we visited a Germany which shows no signs of its destruction in World War II.
10. As she left the palace, Cinderella lost a glass slipper, which later proved most fortunate.

*Other Words Introducing Relative Clauses:*

11. After the Academy Awards are over, the stars go to the parties where they will be seen together.
12. Near the time when the song will be sung, light the candles on the cake.
13. The beach where I found these shells is now under water.
14. In 1903, when Alsace was part of Germany, this castle was restored.
15. In the countryside, where he was born and grew up, Jerome felt most at home.
16. The year after I left home was very difficult for me.
17. There were many reasons why he left home.
18. The time when I most need you is now.
19. There was a time before I had children when I could think only of myself.
20. Prohibition was a time when religion legislated national public policy in the United States.

*Relative Pronouns and Other Words Introducing Relative Clauses:*

21. The salmon, which are stopped by Grand Coulee Dam, are gone forever from the fishery at Kettle Falls, where a major Native American fishery still existed in 19
22. The salmon which do not get through the locks on the dams of the lower Columbia do not get back to the Snake and its tributaries where they should spawn.
23. The salmon fingerlings that come back down stream are often sucked into the giant turbines, which produce cheap electricity for the Northwest, and are killed.
24. Salmon fingerlings that go over the dams sometimes get the bends and die.
25. The dams which have turned the Columbia into a series of lakes are one of the causes of the decline in the number of salmon in Washington, Oregon, and Idaho.
26. Another cause is the clear cutting of forests whose root systems once held the earth during heavy rains and snow melt.
27. Cattle that walk in the small streams where salmon spawn also destroy the spawning areas.
28. The Native Americans who once fished the streams of the Northwest for salmon created ceremonies which would ensure the yearly return of the salmon.
29. These ceremonies, in which the salmon are honored, worked for over a thousand years.
30. Now we live in a time when the ceremonies no longer work.

**B. Sentence Combining**

Combine each group of sentences into one sentence that uses at least one relative clause. The starred sentence should be emphasized (be the independent clause.)

*Example*

\*The apricots must be ripe.

You use the apricots for apricot jam.

*The apricots that you use for apricot jam must be ripe.*

1. \*Children play in the street.  
The children have nowhere else to play.  
The street is busy.
2. \* I was glad to meet the woman.  
The woman's cake won first prize at the fair.
3. \*The people have a rock band.  
The people live next door.
4. \*Interstate 5 was damaged in the last Los Angeles earthquake.  
Interstate 5 runs north and south between Canada and Mexico.
5. \*Puerto Vallarta is on the Pacific Coast of Mexico.  
I am going to Puerto Vallarta for my vacation.
6. Rio de Janeiro is known for its *Carnaval*  
\*Rio de Janeiro is the second largest city of Brazil.
7. \*The Middle Ages was a time.  
In that time, English underwent great changes.
8. \**L'Avventura* both bored and captivated audiences.  
*L'Avventura's* director, Antonioni, died in 1994.
9. \*Sam Shepard has called country music the only really adult music.  
Country music's theme is lost loves.  
Country music's theme is lost lives.
10. \*The raven is a large completely black bird.  
The raven is important in folktales and mythologies around the world.
11. \*Fish wheels depleted the salmon runs by about 5 percent at the end of the

nineteenth century.

Fish wheels caught the salmon in buckets and dumped them out of the river.

12. Salmon canneries were very profitable for a short period of time.  
\*Salmon canneries hired large numbers of Chinese workers.
13. \*The Chinese workers could can a ton of salmon per hour.  
Each worker could clean a salmon in forty-five seconds.
14. \*A machine replaced the Chinese workers.  
The machine worked much faster than any human could.
15. \*The machine was itself soon to be useless.  
The machine replaced Chinese workers.
16. \*Fish wheels were finally banned in Oregon and Washington.  
Fish wheels are merely symptomatic of our overuse of natural resources.
17. The salmon runs had been depleted by 50 percent before the dams were built.  
\*The salmon runs are now at crisis levels.
18. \*The salmon enter the Columbia from the Pacific Ocean.  
The salmon have 25 percent body fat to begin their trip upstream.
19. \*Spawning streams are too warm for the salmon's cold-blooded system.  
The temperature in the spawning streams now reaches 70°F in September.
20. \*The salmon return to their home stream.  
The home stream is where they lay their eggs.  
The home stream is where they die.

### C. On Your Own

1. Write five sentences that correctly use *who* to begin a relative clause. (Example: *Jeremy, who has not danced in years, left his wife for a dancer.*)
2. Write five sentences that correctly use *whom* to begin a relative clause. (Example: *The suspect whom the police have been seeking for three years was finally caught.*)
3. Write five sentences that correctly use *that* to begin a relative clause. (Example: *The windows that I washed yesterday will be dirty again soon.*)
4. Write five sentences that use relative adverbs to begin a relative clause. (Example: *There was a time when Pennsylvania was heavily forested.*)

### D. Relative Clauses in Published Writing

Here is a passage by writer Ian Frazier. Locate the relative clauses in the passage and comment on their use. How might the same information be conveyed without relative clauses? Compare the effects of other possible phrasings with the effect of the original.

On another corner is the Pine Ridge post office, which shares a large brick building with an auditorium called Billy Mills Hall, where most of the important indoor community gatherings are held. On another corner is a two-story brick building containing tribal offices and the offices of the Oglala Department of Public Safety--the tribal police. . . . On another corner is a combination convenience store and gas station that then was called Big Bat's Conoco and now is called Big Bat's Texaco. Le and I parked and went in.

Ian Frazier, "On the Rez," *The Atlantic Monthly*, December 1999, 68.

### E. Combining in Context

In the following paragraphs, change one or more of the independent clauses to relative clauses in order to improve paragraph coherence.

1. The Pueblo united briefly to drive the Spanish from their lands. The Pueblo had no history of confederacy for any reason. When their religion was suppressed beyond their endurance, they finally began to listen to ideas of confederacy. A San Juan Pueblo medicine man named Popé was flogged and driven from San Juan Pueblo. The Spanish were numerous in the San Juan Pueblo area. He went to the more distant pueblo of Taos and from there helped direct the revolt. He communicated with the other pueblos including the Hopi by sending around a piece of cloth with knots. The knots indicated the exact day of the revolt. On that day, each pueblo rose, attacked, and killed the friar assigned to it and whatever Spanish soldiers and colonists they could. Then they moved toward Santa Fe with their Apache allies to drive out the Spanish. About 1,700 Spanish soldiers and colonists were driven out of Pueblo country and across the Rio Grande at what is today El Paso/Juarez. It was sixteen years before the Spanish recovered their position in the Pueblo area; they never reestablished control over the Hopi.

2. In 1869 John Wesley Powell led an expedition of nine men and four boats down the Colorado River and through the Grand Canyon. John Wesley Powell lost his right arm in the Civil War. For seventeen days they ran the river, gliding past hills and ledges, sweeping past sharp angles. The angles jutted out into the river. When they stopped briefly on a patch of dry or wet sand at the river's edge, they ate from their remaining food supply--unleavened biscuits, spoiled bacon, and lots of coffee. Then they returned to the river. The river roared constantly in their ears. Sometimes they had difficult portages; these portages kept them to five miles a day. Sometimes portage was impossible, so they stayed in the river, shooting the rapids, swirling in eddies, making thirty-five miles a day. In his journal, Powell describes the Grand Canyon as a granite

prison. In some places it rose a mile above the river. Three of the men could endure it no more and left the expedition on August 28 for an overland trip. On August 30, 1869, the remaining six men emerged from the canyon into open sky. That evening they sat around the campfire, talking of the Grand Canyon, talking of home, but talking chiefly of the three men. The men had left them. They learned later that the three men managed to climb out of the canyon but were killed by Native Americans. The Native Americans mistook them for miners. The miners had killed a Native American woman. A couple of years after this trip, Powell made another trip down the Grand Canyon and then turned his journals of the two trips into a book, *Explorations of the Colorado River*. The book was published in 1875.

### **E. Revising Your Writing for Rhetoric**

Choose a piece of your own writing and revise it using relative clauses where these would be effective. Consider the following questions when you think about revising.

1. Is there information interrupting the flow of your paragraphs that would fit in a relative clause?
2. Are there places where you could use a series of relative clauses or where you could balance relative clauses in separate independent clauses?