

Relative Clauses That Identify (Define) Their Head

No Comma

	Subject	Object	Possessive
Person	who that	who/whom that	whose
Thing	which that	which that	whose / of which

The relative clause provides information that is necessary to identify the person or thing that the relative pronoun refers to. Because the information in the relative clause is essential, it cannot be separated from its head by a comma in the following sentences.

- The man who told me this refused to give me his name.
- The man to whom I had spoken refused to give me his name.
- The man whose telephone I had found refused to give me his name.
- The table that fell over is in the corner.
- The table that I don't want is by the door.
- Take the table whose leg is broken to the carpenter, please.

Tips:

Do not use 'which' for identifying relative pronouns; use 'that' and 'whose/of which' only.

'That' cannot be preceded by a comma in the above sentences.

If there is no referent, use 'who' for a person, 'what' for a thing, and 'whose' for the possessive:

- I don't know who brought that delicious cake.
- He didn't believe what I said. (NB. He didn't believe all **that** I said. 'All' is a referent.)
- I know to what we can attribute this failure. / I know what we can attribute this failure to.
- I wonder whose handbag that is.

Relative Clauses That Are Not Needed To Identify (Define) Their Head

Mandatory Commas

	Subject	Object	Possessive
Person	who	who/whom	whose
Thing	which	which	whose / of which

The relative clause provides information that is not needed to identify the person or thing that the relative pronoun refers to. Because the information in the relative clause is parenthetical, it must be separated from its head by a comma in the following sentences.

- My neighbour, who is very pessimistic, says that there will be no apples next year.
- Mr. Jones, to whom I had previously spoken, refused to answer my call.
- Alice, whose telephone I found yesterday, has invited me to dinner.
- The philosophy of Buddhism, which doesn't interest me, is the next topic on the agenda.
- The philosophy of Buddhism, to which many people adhere, is the next topic on the agenda.
- The philosophy of Buddhism, whose proponents include many Asians, is our next topic.

Tip:

If an entire clause is the referent, use 'which' and a comma:

- I didn't know who would be coming to my party, which irritated me.