

relative clauses

We have mentioned clauses intermittently. A clause is a complete grammatical formation that contains a verb and often many of the other elements (subject, objects, complements, adverbials) that comprise a sentence. Indeed, a sentence is an independent clause. A coordinated (or "compound") sentence contains more than one independent clause.

As the term "independent" suggests, there are also dependent or **subordinate clauses** that serve various functions within complete "complex" sentences. We will concentrate on three kinds, starting with **relative clauses**.

Relative clauses are common postmodifiers of nouns. One can think of relative-clause constructions as a combination of two sentences. But the sentences are not coordinated; one is transformed into a subordinate clause that could not stand alone. In each of these following examples, the relative clause is underlined. In the first three, the relative clause is introduced by either a *wh-* word or the "relativizer" *that*.

- Tweedy is a grey cat.
- This grey cat caught a bird.
- Tweedy is the grey cat who caught the bird.

- Tweedy eats Fancy Feast.
- Fancy Feast is a major cat-food brand.
- Tweedy eats Fancy Feast, which is a major cat-food brand.

- I bought the cat food.
- Tweedy loves that cat food.
- I bought the cat food that Tweedy loves.

or

- I bought the cat food Tweedy loves.

In that final example, the relativizer is optional; the sentence can work with a "zero relative." This is because the noun phrase being postmodified ("cat food") is the object of the sentence transformed into a relative clause. When the N or NP being postmodified is the subject instead, one must supply a relative word, at least in standard English.

- *Tweedy is a grey cat caught a bird.
- *Tweedy eats Fancy Feast is a major brand.

The first two examples also present an important contrast. In writing, we place a comma (and in speech, a brief but perceptible pause) before a postmodifying relative clause that gives incidental information about the noun or NP it modifies.

In "Tweedy is the grey cat **who** caught the bird," Tweedy's guilt is essential to the sentence. In "Tweedy eats Fancy Feast, **which** is a major cat-food brand," the brand visibility of Fancy Feast is nice to know, but not vital. One could put the information about the brand in parentheses, or after a dash:

- Tweedy eats Fancy Feast (a major brand).
- Tweedy eats Fancy Feast - a major brand.

or indeed just after a comma, as an appositive:

- Tweedy eats Fancy Feast, a major brand.

Linguists call essential postmodifiers **restrictive** - in this case, we zero in on Tweedy's specific actions (catching the bird). Incidental postmodifiers are **non-restrictive**: the information they supply is "by the way" (the marketing status of Fancy Feast).

Note that the concept of restrictive vs. non-restrictive also applies to appositives:

- My cat Tweedy catches birds. My cat Whisper just sleeps all day. (restrictives)
- I bought some Temptation Treats for the neighbor's cat, Fluffy. (non-restrictive)

In the first example, the sentences assign behaviors to the specific cats named in the appositives. In the second, the fact that the cat is named Fluffy is nice to know, but is beside the point.

Sentential relative clauses modify entire sentences or clauses, and are typically non-restrictive.

- Tweedy hunts birds, **which** is typical kitten behavior.
- I went to Target and bought a cat stroller, **which** is an extravagant purchase for me.