Relative Clauses and Pronouns

Relative clauses are dependent clauses that modify nouns or noun phrases. They begin with a relative pronoun such as: *who*, *whom*, *whose*, *which*, *that*, *where*, and *when*. Like all pronouns, they refer back to a noun which is called its "antecedent." (Some of these pronouns have other uses, such as demonstrative or interrogative. Do not confuse these functions with what we are discussing in this handout.)

The differences between the relative pronouns are as follows:

- Use *who*, *whom*, and *whose* when referring to people;
- Use *which* and *that* for things;
- Use *when* for time;
- Use *where* for places.

The differences between *who*, *whom*, and *whose*:

- *Who* is used for the subject of the clause. For example, "The woman *who teaches English* is named Sally." *Who* is the subject of the clause, "who teaches English."
- *Whom* is used for the object of the clause. For example, "The man *whom the lady married* is very nice." *Whom* is the object of the clause, "whom the lady married." To check yourself, put the subject first: "the lady married whom."
- *Whom* is used for the object of a preposition. For example, "*Of whom* are you speaking?" "*About whom* are you referring?" "*To whom* shall we go?" "*For whom* is this gift?"
- *Whose* is used to show possession. For example, "The family *whose house was burglarized* is okay." *Whose* is in the possessive case referring to the family.

Exceptions:

It is common now that fewer and fewer people are using "whom." They use "who" most of the time, except in familiar expressions such as, "to whom it may concern." In other words, formal usage requires, "whom," while informal usage

allows for, and might even prefer, "who." So you need to know your audience and whether you are speaking/writing in a formal or informal tone. Ask yourself the question: "Would *whom* sound too stuffy?" or "Would *who* sound too casual?"

Other Examples:

- *When* refers to time: "The day *when I got married* was a wonderful day."
- *Where* refers to place: "The house *where I was born* was very small."

Non-Restrictive & Restrictive Clauses: Which & That

A non-restrictive clause is a clause that is unnecessary to the sentence. It uses "which" and is set off by commas. For example, let us say that I am speaking to you of a well on my property, and for some reason I add in conversation a piece of incidental information about its age:

"The well, which is very old, ran dry."

The sentence is: "The well ran dry." I merely added, "which is very old," as an interesting but unnecessary piece of information. Also notice that I used "which" and commas.

A restrictive clause is a clause that is necessary to the sentence. It uses "that" and is NOT set off by commas. Let us take the example of the well above, only this time you know that I have three wells on my property, one of which is very old. So I would say:

"The well that is very old ran dry."

The sentence is still: "The well ran dry." But in this conversation, you need more information. After all, you know that I have three wells on my property and you need to know which one ran dry. So I have to add, "that is very old," so that you will know which one I am talking about. It is necessary information. Also notice that I used "that" and no commas.

Material for this handout is taken from: The Writing Center at Texas A&M
www.writingcenter.tamu.edu