Relative Pronouns

Relative pronouns fall into two categories: *definite* relative pronouns (which build adjectival clauses) and *indefinite* relative pronouns (whose clauses act like nouns).

Put another way, relative pronouns help form *relative clauses* that function either as adjectives or nouns.

Relative pronouns are *who (whom, whose), which, that, whoever (whomever, whosever), what, whatever.*

The man *who stole the car* has been caught.

*The man has been caught* is the main clause. The relative clause is used as an adjective to modify the noun *man.*

The choice of *who* or *whom* depends on its construction within the relative clause.

The man *whom you accused* is not guilty.

The grammarian *to whom I spoke* was very helpful.

Here the relative pronouns serve as objects, of the verb *accused* and of the preposition *to*; therefore the objective form is used.

Compare:

- whom you accused
- who accused you
Whose, the possessive form of who, is commonly used as an adjective.

The woman whose house I rented is my cousin. (whose mod. house)

The relative pronouns which and that do not have case changes.

The wind [that comes in spring] . . . (subject)
The house [that Tom built] . . . (direct object)
The book [to which he referred] . . . (obj. of prep)

Definite relative pronouns have antecedents in the main clause and are adjectival. When used without antecedents, relative pronouns are called indefinite.

I can guess [whom you’re referring to.]
I know [whose it was]
[What I think] doesn’t seem to matter.
[Whoever comes] will be welcome
He does [whatever he likes.]

Notice that the relative clauses in the sentences above are not used as adjectives but as nouns. How about in the sentences below?

Whomever you sat by surely enjoyed the game.

The weathervane that had survived so much weather finally broke and tumbled to the ground in a way that was very mournful.

The coffee which she brewed looked like syrupy gas-like oily soup.