

What are relative pronouns?

Read the following pairs of sentences:

I saw a little girl. She was very beautiful.

I know a man. His son is at Oxford.

He got a letter. He had been expecting it.

Each of these pairs can be combined into a single sentence:

I saw a little girl who was very beautiful.

I know a man whose son is at Oxford.

He got a letter that he had been expecting.

Here the words who, whose and which are examples of relative pronouns. Let's examine what purpose they serve in the sentences.

In sentence 1, who stands for the little girl: hence it is a pronoun. It also connects the two statements 'I saw a little girl' and 'She was very beautiful'. Hence it acts as a conjunction. Thus it does double work and may be called a conjunctive pronoun. But it is actually called a relative pronoun because it relates or refers to a noun that has gone before it.

In sentence 2 and 3, the words whose and which also do double work as pronoun and conjunction. Both are, therefore, called relative pronouns.

The noun to which a relative pronoun refers is called its antecedent. In the sentences given above, the nouns girl, man and letter are the antecedents of who, whose and which respectively.

Functions of the relatives within their clauses

Within the subordinate clause the relative pronoun may serve as subject or object of the verb, or object of a preposition.

As subject

What are relative pronouns?

Trust no man who does not love his country. (Here the relative pronoun who is the subject of the subordinate clause 'who does not love his country'.)

As object of the verb

There I met an old man whom my father had known.

As the object of a preposition

There was no room in which we could stay.

Note that when the relative pronoun is the object of a preposition, we can put the preposition at the end of the clause. In such cases we usually omit the relative pronoun.

There was no room we could stay in.