Making English Grammar Meaningful and Useful
Mini Lesson #15
Adjective Clauses: Do They Define or Tell Us More Information?

The purpose of this lesson is to explain several characteristics of Adjective Clauses.

**ADJECTIVE CLAUSES** are word groups with Subjects-Verb Combinations that describe nouns. Adjective Clauses are found after the nouns that they describe.

**Adjective Clause Connectors** always stand for the noun that the clause describes, and they are always found at the beginning of the clause. However, the **Connector** can actually be either the **subject** of the **Clause** or the **object** of the **Clause**. In the following two examples, the **Adjective Clause Connector** is the word that in both sentences, and in both sentences the connector stands for ‘the student’. However, in the first sentence that is the subject of the Adjective Clause. In the second sentence, that is the object of the Adjective Clause.

I ran into a student that saw you at the game.
I ran into a student that you saw at the game.

In both sentences, that refers to the ‘student’ and that comes at the beginning of the Clause. Notice, however, in the first sentence, ‘the student saw you’, and in the second sentence, ‘you saw the student’.

Another distinction is whether the noun is a **person** or a **thing**. The **Connector** that can be used for either persons or things. In place of that, the **Connector** who can be used for persons, and the **Connector** which can be used for things. The following examples illustrate this difference.

I went to a game which you saw on television.
I met a famous person who you saw on television.

The **Connector** ‘that’ could be used in place of both ‘which’ and ‘who’. (The connector **whom** can be used in place of who, but it is not used often in modern English.)

When dealing with **Adjective Clauses**, the student needs to recognize the **Subject-Verb Combinations** of both the **Main Clause** and the **Adjective Clause**. **Adjective Clauses** can describe both **Subjects** and **Objects** of **Main Clauses**. This is illustrated with these sentences:

The book which you read is a best seller. (‘book’ is the **subject** of the Main Clause.)
I read the book which you recommended. (‘book’ is the **object** of the Main Clause.)

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One more distinction is important to know about Adjective Clauses. Some Adjective Clauses define the noun that they follow. Other adjective clauses describe the nouns that they follow without defining them. Look at these examples:

I met the person who you saw on television.
I met Nelson Mandela, who you saw on television.

In the first sentence, the person is defined by the Clause. The Clause tells us what person ‘I met’. In the second sentence, ‘I met Nelson Mandela’. He is already known. That you saw Nelson Mandela on television is just additional information. The first sentence has a Defining Adjective Clause. The second sentence has a Non-Defining Adjective Clause. There are a few things to notice about the Connectors in these two sentences. In the first sentence, you can use that in place of who. You can also delete the Connector and use no connector at all. Both of the following sentences are grammatical.

I met the person that you saw on television.
I met the person you saw on television. (no clause connector.)

If you try to make similar sentences about Nelson Mandela, they would be grammatically incorrect. Both of these sentences are ungrammatical.

I met Nelson Mandela, that you saw on television.
I met Nelson Mandela, you saw on television. (no clause connector)

Defining Adjective Clauses are very closely tied to the Nouns they define, and commas are usually not used with them. Non-Defining Adjective Clauses are not so closely tied to the Nouns they describe, and they are usually separated from the Main Clause with commas.