

Reduced Relative Clauses in English: Forms, Derivation, and Functional Characteristics

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Abstract: *This study investigates the structural properties, derivational mechanisms, and functional characteristics of reduced relative clauses (RRCs) in English. It examines how RRCs are derived from full relative clauses (FRCs) through systematic deletion and syntactic restructuring, highlighting distinctions between participial and infinitival forms. The research also explores the role of RRCs as noun phrase modifiers, maintaining semantic equivalence with their full counterparts, and their effect on discourse economy and clarity. An integrative methodology combining traditional syntactic analysis, corpus-based research, and contemporary processing studies is employed, reflecting both usage-based and cognitive perspectives on relative clause diversity. Findings indicate that RRCs constitute a systematic linguistic phenomenon governed by syntactic rules, discourse constraints, and cognitive processing considerations.*

Keywords: Reduced relative clauses, participial clauses, infinitive clauses, noun modifiers, syntactic economy, English grammar

1. Introduction

Reduced relative clauses are truncated forms added to noun phrases in English, structurally differing from full relative clauses by omitting elements such as relative pronouns and auxiliary verbs while retaining semantic content. This reduction reflects grammatical economy and information density principles in natural language use.

Recent corpus-based studies show that the variation in relative clause forms is not arbitrary but influenced by frequency, structural predictability, and communicative context (Biber et al., 2020; Huddleston & Pullum, 2021). For instance, relative clauses without overt relative pronouns are increasingly common in spoken and written English, reflecting trends toward concise expression (ouci.dntb.gov.ua).

From both generative and usage-based perspectives, RRCs illustrate how speakers exploit syntactic reduction to balance brevity and clarity, making them an important area of study in theoretical and applied linguistics.

2. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, integrative methodology to provide a comprehensive analysis of RRCs:

- Descriptive syntactic analysis: Using established grammar frameworks to examine the structure, derivation, and function of RRCs (Quirk et al., 1973; Celce-Murcia & Freeman, 1983).
- Corpus-based investigation: Drawing on contemporary English corpora and digital text repositories to examine real usage patterns, frequency, and distribution of RRC forms (Biber et al., 2020; Huddleston & Pullum, 2021).
- Cognitive and usage perspectives: Incorporating processing and acquisition studies to assess functional, communicative, and cognitive constraints affecting RRC comprehension and production (ouci.dntb.gov.ua).

This combined approach ensures analysis of both formal structural properties and practical language use, highlighting how grammar interacts with discourse and cognition.

3. Definition of Reduced Relative Clauses

RRCs occur when full relative clauses undergo systematic deletion of some surface elements while maintaining their modifying function. Descriptive grammar traditionally defines them as incomplete noun modifiers that follow the noun and retain semantic equivalence with their full counterparts:

The man running the shop vs. The man who is running the shop (Wikipedia, 2025).

Explanation: The relative pronoun *who* and auxiliary *is* are omitted. *Running* now functions as a modifier of *man*, retaining the original meaning.

Modern linguistic frameworks integrate structural derivation with frequency-based analyses, recognizing participial and infinitive reductions as valid relative tools in English (Biber et al., 2020; Huddleston & Pullum, 2021).

4. Historical Development

Historical linguistics indicates that RRCs have roots in early English, where relative clauses without explicit markers were permissible. Bever and Langendoen (1971) suggest that initial paratactic juxtaposition gradually evolved into more integrated relative structures. Recent corpus analyses show an increased use of zero relative pronouns, particularly in object relative clauses, highlighting historical variation and gradual adoption of reduced forms (ouci.dntb.gov.ua).

These patterns demonstrate that the evolution of relative clauses is shaped by textual styles, structural complexity, and communicative preferences across genres and periods.

5. Formation of Reduced Relative Clauses

The formation of RRCs depends on structural conditions and typically involves:

Deletion of the relative pronoun and auxiliary verb:

The woman who is reading the book → The woman reading the book

Explanation: who is omitted; reading functions as a modifier of woman, keeping the meaning.

Voice distinction:

Active: The man who writes reports → The man writing reports

Explanation: Present participle writing replaces who writes, making the clause concise.

Passive: The bus which has been repaired → The bus repaired

Explanation: which has been is omitted; repaired modifies bus directly.

These patterns reflect structural economy and constraints on movement and deletion (McCawley, 1988; Torchi, 2002).

6. Types of Reduced Relative Clauses with Examples and Explanation

6.1 Participial Reductions

a) Present participle (active)

The man walking in the park is my neighbor.

Explanation: The relative pronoun who and auxiliary is are deleted; walking modifies man.

Students studying in the library are focused.

Explanation: Studying functions as a participial modifier; deletion of who are improves conciseness.

b) Past participle (passive)

The book written by the author won an award.

Explanation: which was is omitted; written acts as a direct modifier.

The car repaired yesterday is ready.

Explanation: repaired serves as a passive participial modifier, retaining original meaning.

c) Perfect participle

Having finished the exam, she left the room.

Explanation: having finished indicates completed action; deletion of relative elements simplifies the sentence.

6.2 Noun Clauses as RRCs

The children playing outside are happy.

Explanation: Present participle playing modifies children; relative pronoun omitted.

The letter signed yesterday was delivered.

Explanation: Past participle signed replaces the full relative clause.

The woman having finished early left the office.

Explanation: Perfect participle having finished conveys completed action; who had omitted.

6.3 Infinitive Reductions

The last student to leave the class missed the announcement.

Explanation: Infinitive to leave substitutes for who left, preserving meaning.

The first person to be seen was John.

Explanation: Passive infinitive to be seen replaces who was seen.

She has a lot of tasks to complete today.

The infinitive *to complete* reduces the full clause that *she needs to complete*.

6.4 Zero Relative Pronouns

The books I bought yesterday are on the shelf.

Explanation: Object relative pronoun that omitted; clause still modifies books.

The man I met yesterday is a doctor.

Explanation: whom omitted; meaning remains clear.

The house we visited last summer was beautiful.

Explanation: which dropped; standard zero relative construction.

7. Derivation of Reduced Relative Clauses

Men who were sharpening knives were leering at us → Men sharpening knives were leering at us.

Explanation: Relative pronoun who and auxiliary were deleted; sharpening modifies men; meaning preserved.

Derived systematically, RRCs maintain essential thematic and semantic properties of full relative clauses (Ross, 1972; Hudson, 1973).

8. Processing and Usage Perspectives

Corpus-based and computational studies show RRCs interact with redundancy and cognitive constraints, sometimes increasing processing load (Biber et al., 2020; Huddleston & Pullum, 2021). Language acquisition research indicates prior exposure and linguistic knowledge influence comprehension and production (ouci.dntb.gov.ua), supporting integrated grammatical and usage-based perspectives.

9. Conclusion

Reduced relative clauses balance brevity, clarity, and cognitive constraints. They are systematically derived from full relative clauses via deletion and structural modification. Participial, infinitive, and noun-based RRCs effectively function as noun modifiers while preserving meaning. Explicit examples demonstrate the interaction between syntactic form, semantics, and discourse function.

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