

Relative Pronouns and Expressions in Spanish

Relative pronouns. Relative expressions typically refer back to another expression or concept which preceded it. The most frequently used type is the **relative pronoun**, usually expressed in English as *that*, *which*, or *who(m)*. We can even omit these pronouns in many cases in English. The noun, pronoun, or frase to which these relative pronouns refer back to is called the **antecedent**. For example:

<u>antecedent</u>	<u>relative pronoun</u>	
The man	that	you met is my uncle.
The man	whom	you met is my uncle.
The man		you met is my uncle.

There are several differences between English and Spanish regarding relatives:

- 1) In Spanish we cannot omit the relative pronoun as occurred in the last example above
- 2) Spanish highlights the difference between relative pronouns and similarly spelled question words by not using accent marks on the relatives
- 3) There are a wider range of relative pronouns from which to choose in Spanish:

que	<i>that, which, who, whom</i>	<table border="1"><tr><td>q</td><td>u</td><td>e</td></tr></table>	q	u	e			
q	u	e						
quien, quienes	<i>who (or whom) after a preposition</i>	<table border="1"><tr><td>q</td><td>u</td><td>i</td><td>e</td><td>n</td></tr></table>	q	u	i	e	n	
q	u	i	e	n				
el que, la que, los que, las que	<i>that, which, who, whom</i>	<table border="1"><tr><td>e</td><td>l</td><td>q</td><td>u</td><td>e</td></tr></table>	e	l	q	u	e	
e	l	q	u	e				
el cual, la cual, los cuales, las cuales	<i>that, which, who, whom</i>	<table border="1"><tr><td>e</td><td>l</td><td>c</td><td>u</td><td>a</td><td>l</td></tr></table>	e	l	c	u	a	l
e	l	c	u	a	l			

Notice that the above list is given in the order of length: **que** (only three characters), **quien** (five), **el que** (six), and **el cual** (seven).

These four relative pronouns are used depending on their length and the distance between them and the antecedent. That is, the longer the distance between the antecedent and the relative pronoun, the longer is the relative pronoun to be used.

In general:

1. The shortest relative pronoun, **que**, must be used when the relative pronoun comes immediately after the antecedent, that is, when there is nothing between the two, not even a comma. It is used for both people and objects, and may serve as the subject or object of the clause which follows:

La pluma que está en la mesa no es mía.	<i>The pen that/which is on the table isn't mine.</i>
Tengo el libro que buscas.	<i>I have the book (that/which) you're looking for.</i>
Conozco a la chica que vive allí.	<i>I know the girl that/who lives there.</i>
El hombre que ves es mi abuelo.	<i>The man (whom) you see is my grandfather.</i>

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2. **Que** may also be used after short separation from the antecedent, for example a comma or — if it is not a person— a short (one-syllable) preposition, for example **a**, **de**, or **en** . However, **que** is not used after such prepositions as **sin**, **por**, or **para** because those combinations would be confused with the adverbial conjunctions **sin que** [*without*], **porque** (*because*) and **para que** [*so that*].

¿Es ésta la escuela a que asististe?	<i>Is that the school (which) you attended?</i>
Leí la novela de que hablabas.	<i>I read the novel you were talking about [about which you were talking].</i>
No es el banco en que deposité mi dinero.	<i>It's not the bank I deposited my money in [in which I deposited my money].</i>

Also note in the above examples that in Spanish you cannot leave prepositions dangling at the end of a sentence as is so often done in English.

3. **Quien** and the plural form **quienes** (*who*) are used when the antecedent is a person and there is some distance between the antecedent and the relative pronoun, usually a comma or a short (one- or two-syllable) preposition:

¿Donde están las secretarias a quienes hablé esta mañana?	<i>Where are the secretaries I spoke to this morning [to whom I spoke this morning]?</i>
María es la mujer con quien quería casarme.	<i>María is the woman I wanted to marry.</i>
Nadie parece conocer a Miguel, de quien está enamorada Elena.	<i>No one seems to know Miguel, whom Elena is in love with [of whom Elena is enamoured].</i>

Note: **Quien** is not used when the relative pronoun comes *immediately* after the antecedent; **que** is used instead (see section 1 above). [Also see [Additional usage](#) below.]

4. **El que** and the other forms —**la que**, **los que**, **las que**— agree in gender (singular/plural) and number (masculine/feminine) with the antecedent. They are typically used when there is some distance between the relative pronoun and the antecedent, for example after a comma or a one-word preposition . This includes one syllable prepositions often used with **que** — particularly **en**— and especially those which que might cause confusion if used with **que**, for example **sin**, **para**, and **por**.

No es el banco en el que deposité mi dinero.	<i>It's not the bank I deposited my money in [in which I deposited my money].</i>
Ésas son las razones por las que no puedo acompañarte.	<i>Those are the reasons why [because of which] I can't go with you.</i>
Perdí los documentos sin los que no puedo matricularme.	<i>I lost the documents without which I can't register.</i>

Note: Also see [Additional usage](#) below.

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El cual and the accompanying forms **la cual**, **los cuales**, and **las cuales**, are used when there is greater distance between the antecedent and the relative pronoun. The most typical examples is after compound prepositions such as **acerca de** (*about, concerning*), **al lado de** (*beside*), **antes de** (*before*), **cerca de** (*near*), **debajo de** (*underneath*), **delante de** (*in front of*), **dentro de** (*inside*), **después de** (*after*), **detrás de** (*behind*), and **por encima de** (*on top of*). As with **el que**, the numerous forms for **el cual** make it useful to distinguish between more than one possible antecedent, as given in example number three below.

Ella estaba arreglando su escritorio, por encima del cual había una cajita de música.

She was arranging her desk, on top of which there was a small music box.

Cerró los párpados, detrás de los cuales parecían bailar los ojos.

He closed his eyelids, behind which his eyes seemed to dance.

Ya conoces a la hermana de Mario, acerca de la cual se oye tanto.

You already know Martha's sister, about whom [i.e., the sister] you hear so much.

Neuter relative pronouns: lo que and lo cual (*which, what*). Since they are neuter forms, these pronouns refer to a situation or concept, not a specific masculine or feminine noun or pronoun. The difference between them is that **lo cual** is used only when it refers to something that has already been mentioned in the same sentence. **Lo que** may be used like **lo cual**, and may also be used to refer to something that has not been brought up before; thus it may be used at the beginning of an utterance.

Tip: when the word “what” appears in a sentence and is not a question word, it is normally translated as **lo que**.

Enrique empezó a gritar en voz muy alta, lo cual [o: lo que] le molestó mucho a su familia.

Enrique began to shout in a very loud voice, which upset his family very much. [The thing referred back to is not a noun phrase such as “the shout” or “his shouts” but the situation involving the verb or the action of shouting.]

No puedo describir lo que vi en la calle esta mañana.

I can't describe what I saw in the street this morning. [Lo cual could not be used here, since there is no antecedent given in the sentence.]

Lo que dijiste no tiene sentido.

What you said doesn't make any sense. [Again, lo cual could not be used here, since there is no antecedent given in the sentence.]

The relative adjective cuyo (*whose*). In contrast to the other relatives, this word is an adjective and as such agrees in person and number with the noun it modifies, not with the person it refers back to. It is best used to refer back to people or at least animate objects, rather than things.

Nunca podré olvidar al hombre, cuyas palabras me consolaron tanto.

I'll never be able to forget the man whose words consoled me so much.

Ella es la pobrecita cuyo esposo nos enfadó.

She's the poor woman whose husband made us angry.

Los chicos, cuyas manos estaban sucias, no quisieron lavarse.

The kids, whose hands were filthy, refused to wash up.

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Note that the Spanish equivalent of question word *whose* is **¿De quién?** [or **¿De quiénes?** if a plural answer is expected]: **¿De quién es ese coche?** (*Whose car is that?*). **¿De quiénes son todos estos abrigos?** (*Whose are all these coats?*).

Other relatives: cuando (when), donde (where), etc. These words may also serve as relatives just as their English counterparts. The same as with the preceding relatives, no written accent mark is used since they are not being used as question words.

¿Recuerdas cuando descubrimos esa caverna?	<i>Do you remember when [the time when, the occasion on which] we discovered that cave?</i>
El pueblo donde crecí ya no existe.	<i>The town where I grew up [= in which I grew up] no longer exists.</i>

Additional usage: Quien, el que as the one(s) who/that. In a previous section, *lo que* was used as “what” (when it is not question word) or “that which”, “the thing that”: **Lo que hiciste me impresionó mucho** (*What you did impressed me a lot*). **Quien** or **quienes** can be used in the same way for persons, and **el que** and its various forms can be used for both persons and things.

Quien [o: El que] duerme mucho pierde mucho.	<i>Whoever [or: The one who, He who] sleeps a lot misses a lot.</i>
Las que dan a luz, dan luz al mundo.	<i>Those [women] who give birth, enlighten the world.</i>
No me gusta ese cuadro. Los que vimos en el museo son mucho mejores.	<i>I don't like that painting. The ones we saw in the museum are much better.</i>

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