

THE RELATIVE ADVERB

Recognize a relative adverb when you find one.

There are only three relative adverbs: **when**, **where**, and **why**. These three words are relative adverbs when they open **adjective clauses**.

These are the patterns:

Noun of Time + **When** + **Subject** + **Verb**

Noun of Place + **Where** + **Subject** + **Verb**

Noun of Explanation + **Why** + **Subject** + **Verb**

Read these examples:

Harold searched the **closet** **where** he had stashed the tear-stained letters from Mona, his ex.

Where he had stashed the tear-stained letters from Mona, his ex describes **closet** (**noun** of place).

Harold remembers the **day** **when** he first introduced Mona to his twenty-seven cats.

When he first introduced Mona to his twenty-seven cats describes **day** (noun of time).

The **reason** **why** Mona broke up with Harold was his refusal to vacuum the cat hair that floated in clumps on the hardwood floor.

Why Mona broke up with Harold describes **reason** (noun of explanation).

Often you can exclude the relative adverb. It is understood to be there even if you do not include it in the sentence.

Consider these examples:

Harold longs for the day ~~when~~ everyone else loves cats the same way that he does.

When Harold is depressed, he finds a place ~~where~~ he can buy a creamy vanilla milkshake, which he shares with his cats.

Picking cat hair off his tongue, Harold never understood the reason ~~why~~ Mona resented his feline friends.

Do not confuse a relative adverb with a subordinate conjunction.

When, where, and why are the only relative adverbs. However, these three words also function as **subordinate conjunctions**. How do you tell the difference?

The key is to identify the word right in front of the **when, where, or why**. If that word is a **noun**, then **when, where, or why** is opening an **adjective clause** and is thus a relative adverb:

Patricia dreams of the **day when** her schedule is her own.

Day = noun; **when** = relative adverb.

Jimmy goes to a **school where** no team has ever won a championship.

School = noun; **where** = relative adverb.

Professor Wong wants an **explanation why** half of Sheila's paper matches Wikipedia entries word for word.

Explanation = noun; **why** = relative adverb.

If you do not find a noun in front of **when, where, or why**, then these same three words are subordinate conjunctions:

Patricia was sound **asleep when** the alarm clock rang.

Asleep = adjective; **when** = subordinate conjunction.

Jimmy does not **know where** he should transfer next fall so that his ferocious chess skills can win school tournaments.

Know = verb; **where** = subordinate conjunction.

Sheila cannot **explain why** her paper matches Wikipedia entries word for word.

Explain = verb; **why** = subordinate conjunction.

Do not confuse a relative adverb with an interrogative word.

When, **where**, and **why** have a third duty—opening a question. When these words begin a question, you will find an inverted subject and verb and the telltale question mark (?) at the end.

Read these examples:

When did you realize that you wanted to adopt a twenty-eighth cat?

Where did Mr. Cuddles swat his catnip-filled mouse toy?

Why is there cat hair on this hardboiled egg?

Same three words, but a different function this time! In these examples, you have *interrogative words*, not relative adverbs.

