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.