

Relative Pronouns — Grammar Capsule

qui · que · dont · ce qui · ce que · ce dont

Companion reference for the Relative Pronouns drill: the two-question test, the six forms, and the traps that break the qui = who / que = which habit.

Part 1 — The two-question test

Two questions decide all six pronouns, in order:

- **1. Is there a real noun right before the blank (a concrete antecedent)?** Yes → a **bare** form (qui / que / dont). No → a **ce-** form (ce qui / ce que / ce dont), which means “what / the thing that.”
- **2. What is the pronoun’s job inside the relative clause?**
 - **Subject** (a verb follows) → **qui / ce qui**
 - **Direct object** (a subject follows) → **que / ce que**
 - **Tied to de** (the verb/expression governs *de*, or “whose”) → **dont / ce dont**

Function in the clause	Concrete antecedent	No antecedent (“what”)
Subject — a verb follows	qui	ce qui
Direct object — a subject follows	que	ce que
Complement of de — verb/noun governs <i>de</i>	dont	ce dont

Part 2 — Animacy is a red herring

This is the single biggest English-transfer error. **qui is not “who” and que is not “which.”** The choice is grammatical function, never whether the thing is a person or an object.

- *le train **qui** part* — a thing takes **qui**, because it’s the subject of *part*.
- *la personne **que** tu as vue* — a person takes **que**, because it’s the object of *as vue*.

Quick test: look at the word right after the blank. A **verb** → qui. A **subject** (je, tu, le directeur...) → que.

Part 3 — dont = “de + something”

Use **dont** whenever the verb or expression in the clause governs *de*, or to mean “whose.” It stands in for *de + antecedent*.

- **Verbs/expressions with de:** avoir besoin / envie / peur / honte de · être fier / sûr / responsable / satisfait / conscient / proche de · parler de · discuter de · se souvenir de · se servir de · s’occuper de · se plaindre de · se méfier de · dépendre de · profiter de · rêver de · souffrir de.
- **“whose”:** *le collègue **dont** la voiture est en panne* (la voiture *du* collègue).

Word order for “whose”: dont + article + noun (*dont la voiture...*) — never *dont sa voiture*.

Part 4 — The ce- forms (no antecedent)

When there’s no noun to point back to, the pronoun absorbs an indefinite “what / that which.” Same function test as the bare forms:

- **ce qui** (subject): *Ce qui m’inquiète, c’est le silence.*
- **ce que** (object): *Je ne sais pas ce que tu veux.*
- **ce dont** (de-governed): *Ce dont j’ai besoin, c’est de vacances.*

They often appear in the cleft frame “Ce qui / que / dont ..., c’est ...”.

Part 5 — Elision que and ce que drop the final -e before a vowel: **que** → **qu'**, **ce que** → **ce qu'** (*la robe **qu'**elle porte* · *ce **qu'**elle a dit*). **qui, dont, ce qui, ce dont never elide** (*ce qui arrive* stays *ce qui*, not **ce qu'arrive*). In the drill you always tap the base button; the sentence shows the elided form for you.

Part 6 — Minimal pairs & classic traps

- *L'homme **qui** parle* (subject) / *L'homme **que** j'ai vu* (object) — same noun, opposite function.
- ***ce qui** ne va pas* (subject) / ***ce que** tu peux* (object) — the “what follows the blank” test on the indefinite forms.
- *le livre **dont** j'ai besoin* (antecedent) / ***ce dont** j'ai besoin* (no antecedent) — same governing verb, presence vs. absence of a noun.
- English “that / which” hides the choice — French forces subject vs. object vs. *de*. Don't translate the English word; ask the two questions.

Scope: this capsule and drill cover the six invariable + indefinite forms. **où** (where/when) and the **lequel** system (*lequel / laquelle / auquel / duquel...*) are a separate difficulty tier — morphological agreement and pied-piping — and are a possible sibling drill, not part of this one.

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