

Describing people and places with qui, que, où, dont

French B1 (intermediate) · Lesson

Quick answer: Relative pronouns link two sentences into one description. Use *qui* for a subject, *que* for a direct object, *où* for a place or a time, and *dont* for anything introduced by *de* or for *whose*. Without a noun before them, use *ce qui*, *ce que* or *ce dont*.

Level: French B1 (CEFR intermediate) · **Standards:** CEFR B1, Writing

What do relative pronouns do in a description?

A relative pronoun joins two short sentences into one richer description. It replaces a noun you have already named, so nothing is repeated. In French the choice depends on the job of the pronoun inside the new clause, not on the English word you would use.

Pronoun	Job in the clause	Example
qui	subject	un quartier qui change vite
que (qu')	direct object	un quartier que j'adore
où	place or time	le quartier où j'habite
dont	replaces <i>de</i> + noun	un quartier dont on parle
ce qui, ce que, ce dont	no noun before them	ce qui me plaît

qui

sujet
+ verbe

que

objet direct
+ sujet + verbe

où

lieu ou temps
+ sujet + verbe

dont

de + nom
+ sujet + verbe

la femme qui rit la femme que je vois la ville où je vis le livre dont j'ai besoin

Which job does the pronoun do in the new clause?

How do you choose between qui and que?

Rule

Qui is the subject of the new clause and is followed directly by a verb. Que is the direct object

and is followed by a subject. Que becomes qu' before a vowel; qui never changes.

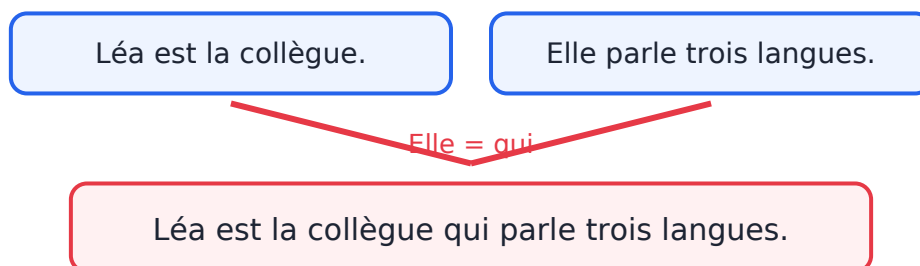
Examples

Léa est la collègue qui parle trois langues. — Léa is the colleague who speaks three languages.

C'est le quartier que mes parents ont choisi. — It is the neighborhood my parents chose.

Le pain qu'elle achète vient de la boulangerie d'à côté. — The bread she buys comes from the bakery next door.

When que stands before a verb in the passé composé with avoir, the past participle agrees with the noun it replaces: les clés que j'ai perdues.



Two sentences become one description.

When do you use où and dont?

Où replaces a place or a time: la rue où je suis née, le jour où il est arrivé. Dont replaces de + noun. It appears after verbs and expressions that take de, such as avoir besoin de, rêver de, parler de and être fier de. It also means *whose*.

Examples

Voici le livre dont j'ai besoin. — Here is the book I need.

J'ai une amie dont le frère est chef à Abidjan. — I have a friend whose brother is a chef in Abidjan.

Common mistake

English often drops the pronoun (*the book I bought*). French never does: le livre que j'ai acheté. Do not use que for a place: say la ville où j'habite. After dont, keep the article and the normal order: dont le frère, never dont son frère.

What do *ce qui*, *ce que* and *ce dont* mean?

When there is no noun before the pronoun, add *ce*: *ce qui* (subject), *ce que* (object), *ce dont* (*de*). They mean *what* or *the thing that*: *Ce qui m'étonne, c'est le prix.* — What surprises me is the price. *Je ne sais pas ce que tu cherches.* — I do not know what you are looking for. *Voilà ce dont j'ai peur.* — That is what I am afraid of.

Culture note

Paris is divided into 20 districts called *arrondissements*. People describe where they live with *où*: *le quartier où j'habite, dans le onzième.*

Zoé's tip

Ask what the pronoun replaces. If you could put *elle* or *il* there, use *qui*. If you could put *la* or *le* after the subject, use *que*. If a preposition *de* fits, use *dont*.

Key points to remember

- *Qui* is followed by a verb; *que* is followed by a subject and a verb.
- *Que* becomes *qu'* before a vowel, but *qui* never elides.
- *Où* replaces a place or a time: *la rue où j'habite, le jour où il est parti.*
- *Dont* replaces *de* + noun and also means *whose*: *dont le frère.*
- French never drops the relative pronoun, unlike English: *le livre que j'ai lu.*

Describing people and places with *qui*, *que*, *où*, *dont*: frequently asked questions

What is the difference between *qui* and *que* in French?

Qui replaces the subject of the second clause, so a verb comes right after it. *Que* replaces the direct object, so a subject comes after it. People and things can follow either pronoun.

When do you use *dont* instead of *que*?

Use *dont* when the verb or expression takes *de*: *avoir besoin de, parler de, rêver de*. Use it also for possession: *une voisine dont le fils joue du violon*. *Que* never replaces *de* + noun.

Can you use *où* for time as well as place?

Yes. *Où* works after nouns of time such as *le jour, l'année* or *le moment*: *le jour où nous sommes arrivés*. This is the French equivalent of *the day when*.

Why does the past participle agree after *que*?

When the direct object comes before the verb, the participle agrees with it in gender and number. In *les photos que j'ai prises*, the participle takes *-es* because *que* stands for *les photos*.

What does *ce qui* mean?

Ce qui means *what* as a subject: *Ce qui me plaît, c'est le calme*. It is used when no noun comes before the pronoun. Use *ce que* for an object and *ce dont* for *de*.