

Choosing *That* or *Which*

That and the Restrictive Clause

Use *that* to introduce a phrase that provides essential information to restrict the noun.

Example: She purchased a scarf that matched her outfit.

The clause “that matched her outfit” provides essential information that restricts the noun (scarf). She did not just purchase just any scarf. She purchased that specific scarf because it matched her outfit. This means the clause introduced by *that* is a **restrictive clause**.

A **restrictive clause** defines a noun or a pronoun with information essential to the overall meaning of the sentence. This information limits the definition or characteristics of the noun, making it more specific than general. If this information were removed, the meaning of the sentence would be drastically altered. When a clause is restrictive, it should be introduced with the word “that” and not set off by commas because the information is essential.

Example: The hikers need shoes that have traction.

In this sentence, the phrase “that have traction” provides vital information that restricts the noun (shoes). The hikers do not need just any shoes; they need shoes with traction. Removing the clause “that have traction” would change the overall meaning of the sentence because the noun would be too general.

Structure: Base sentence + that + restricting/essential information describing the noun/pronoun.

Which and the Non-Restrictive Clause

Use *which* to introduce a phrase that provides additional, but not vitally necessary, information about the noun.

Example: She purchased a scarf, which happened to match her outfit.

The information about the scarf may be interesting, but it is not vital to the meaning of the sentence. She was going to purchase the scarf; the fact that it matched her outfit was coincidental. If the *which* clause were removed, the overall meaning of the sentence would remain the same: she purchased a scarf. This makes the clause **non-restrictive** because it provides no information that restricts the characteristic of the noun to make it more specific.

A **non-restrictive clause** provides extra information about a previously defined noun or pronoun. This additional information is non-essential because it may add further depth to the sentence, but it does not add any information that could change the definition of the noun or pronoun being described. When a clause is non-restrictive, it should be introduced with the word “which.” Non-restrictive clauses are by definition non-essential; therefore, all non-restrictive phrases are set off by commas because all non-essential phrases are set off by commas. Setting information off with commas indicates the information can be removed without altering the sentence’s meaning.

Example: The hikers need shoes with traction, which are expensive.

In this sentence, the phrase “which are expensive” provides additional information about the shoes, but it does not provide necessary information that alters the meaning of the sentence. The only essential information about the shoes is that they need to have traction.

Structure: Base sentence + comma + which + extra information describing the noun/pronoun.

Note: In some fields, *which* is used with both restrictive and non-restrictive clauses. However, American academic writing distinguishes between the non-restrictive “which” with a comma and the restrictive “that” without a comma. Kate L. Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, 8th ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 297.