

## That vs. Which

### Explanation

Both *that* and *which* can be used to describe a noun or group of nouns by introducing a dependent clause. Each word, however, is used for a different purpose. *That* is restrictive, meaning it is used with information that is pertinent or needed in the sentence. When you use *that*, you are singling out the noun and explaining how it is different or important in the context of your sentence.

Consider the example below. It uses *that* to make the book specific. In the context of this sentence, the fact that this book was the one on the table is important.

**Example:** Here is the book *that was on the table*.

The dependent clauses introduced by *that* can begin with two types of words: (1) a verb or (2) a subject. The purpose for each of these dependent clauses is different. The clauses that begin with a verb generally indicate *a characteristic or an aspect* of the noun being described. For example, Sentence 1 below uses a clause that begins with a verb to explain when the ice cream had been delivered. Those that begin with a subject generally indicate *what someone or something has done* to the noun being described. For instance, the clause beginning with a noun in Sentence 2 describes what has been done to the noun by the author.

1. The ice cream *that was delivered today* is in the storeroom freezer.
2. The ice cream *that I ordered yesterday* was delivered at noon.

*Which*, on the other hand, is nonrestrictive and introduces information that is non-essential or extra. A *which* clause may or may not single out a noun or make it specific like a *that* clause, but the information singling out the noun is not essential to the main point of the sentence. Since a *which* clause adds extra information, it needs to be offset with punctuation. If the *which* occurs in the middle of the sentence, it **must** be preceded and followed by commas (see the sentence below). If the *which* occurs at the end of the sentence, it **must** be preceded by a comma and followed by the period. This punctuation indicates that the *which* clause could be removed from the sentence without upsetting its meaning.

Consider the sentence below. It uses *which* to add extra information. That Mars is the writer's favorite planet is nonessential. What is important is that Mars is the fourth planet from the Sun.

**Example:** Mars, which is my favorite planet, is fourth from the Sun in this solar system.

Like *that*, dependent clauses introduced by *which* can also begin with two types of words: (1) a verb or (2) a subject. The purpose for each of these dependent clauses is different. The clauses that begin with a verb generally indicate *a characteristic or an aspect* of the noun being described. For instance, the clause in Sentence 1 is explaining that Yosemite is beautiful. Those that begin with a subject generally indicate *what someone or something has done* to the noun being described. For example, Sentence 2 indicates that the author visited Yosemite this summer.

1. Yosemite National Park, which is a beautiful, was one of the first wilderness parks in the United States.
2. Yosemite National Park, which I visited this summer, was one of the first wilderness parks in the United States.

## **Helpful Tips**

1. Writers can omit *that* if removing the word will not confuse the reader.

**Example 1:** Here is the solution *that* I am suggesting.

**Becomes:** Here is the solution I am suggesting.

**Example 2:** I know *that* you were absent yesterday.

**Becomes:** I know you were absent yesterday.

2. Writers should replace *that* with *who* or *whom* when the subject consists of people or named and/or personified animals. *Who* is used when the noun being described is the subject of the verb in the dependent clause. *Whom* is used when the noun being described is the object of the verb in the dependent clause.

**Incorrect:** Johnny Depp, *that* met me at Il Fornaio, was well dressed.

**Correct:** Johnny Depp, *who* met me at Il Fornaio, was well dressed.

**Explanation:** Because the noun being described with the dependent clause is a person, in this case Johnny Depp, you would not use *that*. Also, because Depp is the subject of the verb in the dependent clause (*He* met me at Il Fornaio), you must use *who* instead of *whom*.

**Incorrect:** Johnny Depp, *that* I want to visit me on my birthday, is unavailable for the whole month of July.

**Correct:** Johnny Depp, *whom* I want to visit me on my birthday, is unavailable for the whole month of July.

**Explanation:** Since the noun being described is a person, you cannot use *that* to describe him. Also, since Depp is the object of the verb in the dependent clause (I want *him* to visit me on my birthday), you would use *whom* instead of *who*.

## **Exercise**

Fill in each blank with either *that*, *which*, *who*, or *whom*.

1. There have been many technological advancements \_\_\_\_\_ have enhanced our studies of medicine.
2. Dr. Stanley, \_\_\_\_\_ has been my physician for years, is retiring.
3. Biology, \_\_\_\_\_ I love, is the study of all living organisms.
4. The foreign exchange student, \_\_\_\_\_ I met on my first day, is in Biology 100W.
5. The medical degree \_\_\_\_\_ she possesses allows her to practice medicine.

Science is an interpretation of reality \_\_\_\_\_ explains our surrounding world. Newton, \_\_\_\_\_ conceptualized the idea of gravity, has added to valuable knowledge constructs that people use to understand their natural surroundings. Laws, \_\_\_\_\_ are only accepted after numerous observations of a particular phenomenon, help construct our belief system. Tomorrow, I will give a speech about Newton, \_\_\_\_\_ continues to be a very important scientist of our day. I will also speak about contemporary scientists, like Jane Goodall, \_\_\_\_\_ I wish I could meet in the near future.

**Answer Key**

1. There have been many technological advancements that have enhanced our studies of medicine.
2. Dr. Stanley, who has been my physician for years, is retiring.
3. Biology, which I love, is the study of all living organisms.
4. The foreign exchange student, whom I met on my first day, is in Biology 100W.
5. The medical degree that she possesses allows her to practice medicine.

Science is an interpretation of reality that explains our surrounding world. Newton, who conceptualized the idea of gravity, has added to valuable knowledge constructs that people use to understand their natural surroundings. Laws, which are only accepted after numerous observations of a particular phenomenon, help construct our belief system. Tomorrow, I will give a speech about Newton, who continues to be a very important scientist of our day. I will also speak about contemporary scientists, like Jane Goodall, whom I wish I could meet in the near future.