

## That vs. Which

Writers commonly confuse *that* and *which*. You may have some vague memory of an English teacher somewhere who mentioned the use of *that* and *which*: in some cases, he or she told you, you should use *that*, and in other cases you should use *which*. But which works when?

*That* and *which* are relative pronouns that we use to create adjective clauses, clauses that modify a noun. Whether you use *that* or *which* depends on whether the information added by the modifier is **restrictive** or **non-restrictive**.

### Restrictive and Non-Restrictive Clauses

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* restricts the meaning of the noun it modifies; *which* elaborates, adding more information about the noun.

**Examples:** Here is the book *that* was on the table.  
Here is *Bleak House*, *which* you will not be able to put down.

In both of these examples, “here” points to a book. In sentence one, however, the “that” clause is necessary to identify the book the sentence points to. “Here is the book,” while it still points to the book, does not identify for the reader the book in question. Which book? *The one on the table*. The meaning of *book* is limited by the restrictive use of *that*.

In the second example, the title of the book already identifies which book we are talking about; the “which” clause just adds a comment on it and adds information that tells us the speaker finds the book compelling.

### The Grammar of the Relative Clause

*That* and *which* are relative pronouns. Like all pronouns they refer back to the noun before them (or should). The *antecedent* is the noun they modify.

The pronoun also has a role to play in the clause it introduces. If followed by a verb, it is the subject of the clause.

**Example:** The book *that* was on the table is gone now.

*That* can also be followed by a noun.

**Example:** The book *that the student left on the table* is missing.

In this example *that* is not the subject of *left*; it is the object of *left*. It names *what* the student left, and *student* is the subject of the verb *left*.

Both of these clauses restrict the meaning of the noun: the first by identifying a characteristic of the book itself (its location), the second by identifying its relationship to another noun (the student who left the book).

*That* and *which* are not the only relative pronouns: *who*, *whom*, and *whose* are also relative pronouns. When you use these pronouns in relative clauses, you need to attend to this internal grammar of the clause to decide whether the subject (who), object (whom), or possessive (whose) form is appropriate. (See the examples in tip #2 below.)

### The Punctuation of Relative Clauses

There are two patterns to keep in mind when punctuating a relative clause.

1. When a clause is restrictive, you do NOT set it apart from the word it modifies. It is a necessary part of the noun phrase, not a separate unit of meaning.
2. When the clause is non-restrictive (not essential to identify the noun), then you use a comma to set it apart from the word it modifies—as a unit of meaning on its own.

Consider the sentences below. They use *which* to add extra information. In the first example, that Mars is the writer's favorite planet is not essential to identify Mars. Mars, a proper noun, already identifies the planet I am talking about.

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

Yosemite National Park, *which is a beautiful*, was one of the first wilderness parks in the United States.

However, look at what happens in this sentence.

**Example:** *The park that I visited this summer*, Yosemite National Park, was one of the first wilderness parks in the United States.

*That I visited this summer* is not set off by commas because it restricts the meaning of the general noun *park*. The non-essential modifier, providing added information is now the noun phrase *Yosemite National Park*.

### Helpful Tips

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

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

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

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

**Revised:** 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 in the subject position within the clause. *Whom* is used when the noun being described is in the object position within the 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.

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.

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*.

### Activity

Fill in each blank in the following sentences: use 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 earned allows her to practice medicine.

Now try filling in the blanks in a full paragraph.

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 for Activity*

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 earned 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.