



That vs Which

Two useful words that help your reader understand your ideas are that and which. While they have similar purposes, the meaning of your sentences will change depending on which one you use. This handout demonstrates the differences between that and which and explains when to use each.

Which: Non-Restrictive Clause

Which signals a non-restrictive clause. A non-restrictive clause adds extra information to a sentence. The essential meaning of the sentence would not change if the non-restrictive clause were omitted. Commas separate the non-restrictive clause from the rest of the sentence. The following examples show two grammatically correct instances:

Example 1: Diamonds, **which sparkle**, are expensive.

Example 2: Adam took his car, **which had a bad transmission**, to the mechanic.

In example 1, the non-restrictive clause (“which sparkle”) adds additional information but does not affect the meaning of the sentence (diamonds are expensive).

In example 2, the non-restrictive clause describes Adam’s car. Knowing that his car has a bad transmission is not necessary to know that he took it to the mechanic.

That: Restrictive Clause

That signals a restrictive clause. A restrictive clause determines information that is necessary to the meaning of the sentence. Without a restrictive clause, the meaning of the sentence would change. Restrictive clauses are not separated with commas. The examples below demonstrate this:

Example 3: Diamonds **that sparkle** are expensive.

Example 4: Adam took his car **that had a bad transmission** to the mechanic.

In Example 3, the restrictive clause (“that sparkle”) restricts what type of diamonds are expensive. This sentence specifies that only “sparkly diamonds” are expensive.

In Example 4, the sentence implies that Adam has more than one car. We cannot remove the restrictive clause (“that has a bad transmission”) because it specifies the car Adam is taking to the mechanic.

Who

Who replaces that and which when referring to a person. Commas signify non-restrictive clauses, and their absence indicates restrictive clauses. The following examples demonstrate how to use who in a sentence:

Example 5: Peter, **who lives in Toronto**, works in the banking industry.

Example 6: Doug and Carol are **Taylor's closest friends who live in the Calgary area**.

In Example 5, who signals a non-restrictive clause because it is separated with commas. We do not need to know that Peter lives in Toronto to understand that he works in the banking industry.

In Example 6, who signals a restrictive clause because there is no comma. This sentence implies that Taylor has closer friends than Doug and Carol, but of all Taylor's friends in the Calgary area, Doug and Carol are the closest.

Whom

Whom is the objective case of who, which means it describes an object rather than a subject. For example, in the sentence, "I love you," I is the subject because it does the action of "loving" and you is the object because it is the one being loved. Below is an example of where to place whom in a sentence:

Example 7: Peter talked to the man **whom I had spoken of**.

In Example 7 the speaker, I, speaks of the man. Therefore, I am doing an action making this the subject while the man is the object because he is being spoken of. An easy way of telling is to identify whether the noun you are describing does an action. For example, "Peter who lives" simplifies down to "Peter lives". An action is being done to someone, such as "Peter whom we spoke of" boils down to "we spoke of Peter."

Resources Consulted

Purdue University. (2024). That vs Which. Retrieved from https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/grammar/that_vs_which.html on 30 Jan. 2025.

T. Krupa. (2012, January 19). That versus which. APA Style Blog. Retrieved from <http://blog.apastyle.org/apastyle/2012/01/that-versus-which.html> on 30 Jan. 2025.