



APSU Writing Center

That Versus Which and Who

That Versus Which and Who

That: Use *that* with restrictive clauses since it limits—or restricts—the identity of the subject in some way, especially when distinguishing it from a larger group.

- *That does not require* a comma.
 - **Example:** The painting *that* was hanging in the foyer was stolen.
 - (The use of "that" in this sentence is correct because the reader intends to single out the one painting that was in the foyer as the stolen painting.)
 - **Example:** I chose the lettuce *that* had the fewest wilted leaves.
- Determine whether the latter part of the sentence directly refers to the first part. If it does, use *that*.
- Determine whether the portion that follows *that* makes the sentence clear and complete. If the portion is needed, use *that*.

Which: Use *which* with nonrestrictive clauses. A nonrestrictive clause may tell something interesting or incidental about a subject, but **it does not define or limit that subject**.

- Which requires a comma.
 - **Example:** The painting, *which* was hanging in the foyer, was stolen.
 - (While this nonrestrictive use tells the reader that the painting was hanging in the foyer, it does not tell which of the several paintings in the foyer was stolen painting.)
 - **Example:** He made an iceberg Caesar salad, *which* did not taste quite right.
- **EXCEPTION:** Use *which* to introduce an essential clause if *that* has already been used to introduce a previous clause.
 - **Example:** That is a problem which cannot be solved without a calculator.
- Determine whether the latter part of the sentence directly refers to the first part. If it does not, use *which*.
- Determine whether the portion that follows that makes the sentence clear and complete. If the portion is not needed for completeness or clarity, then that portion becomes a non-essential phrase, surrounded by commas, and introduced by *which*.



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Who: Regardless of whether the clause is restrictive or nonrestrictive, **if it is about human beings, who is used rather than that or which**, especially for specific people.

- Since *who* is the only option, distinguish between a restrictive use and a nonrestrictive use by the use of commas.
 - **Restrictive Example:** The suspect in the lineup *who* has red hair committed the crime.
 - (Note how the subject “suspect” in this sentence is restricted in two ways: the reader knows that this suspect is both in the lineup and has red hair. As a result, one can conclude that the other suspects, who are not in the lineup, could not have committed the crime.)
 - **Nonrestrictive Example:** The suspect in the lineup, *who* owns a red car, committed the crime. (While the nonrestrictive clause “who owns a red car” tells the reader something about the suspect, it does not foreclose the possibility that there are several different suspects in the lineup with red cars. The car color may reveal something useful, but it does not restrict the reader to only one possibility.)
- Some writers insist that the word *that* cannot be used to refer to people, but in situations where the people are not specifically named, it is acceptable.
 - **Example:** The students *that* study usually do the best.

Tip(s):

- Restrictive and nonrestrictive clauses can be combined; however, the basic rules for the use of “that” and “which” still apply. This combination is demonstrated when a writer is able to provide both limiting and non-limiting information about a subject in a single sentence.
 - **Example:** The Van Gogh *that* was hanging in the foyer, *which* we purchased in 1929 for \$10,000, was stolen.