THAT versus WHICH

GRAMMAR

ENGLISH FOR ACADEMIC SUPPORT

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PURPOSE

Relative pronouns to introduce a dependent clause.

THAT OR WHICH?

If the dependent clause is required to understand the sentence (defining), use that without a comma.

If the dependent clause is not essential to the sentence meaning, use which plus a comma.

CLAUSES

A clause is a group of words that provides details to its antecedent (noun). This group of words includes a noun and a verb.

- The cyclist that broke the world record was sponsored by the company.
- The cyclist, which broke the world record, was sponsored by the company.

Two types of clauses:

1. Independent Clause
   - Complete thought

2. Dependent Clause
   - Incomplete thought
   - Must be partnered with an independent clause
   - two forms of dependent clauses

a) Restrictive Clause
   - Essential to sentence meaning
   - Clause restricts the meaning of the antecedent
   - No commas are used.

Also referred to as the essential clause and the defining clause.

b) Nonrestrictive Clause
   - Not essential to understand the sentence
   - Clause simply adds extra information for the audience
   - Audience can ignore the clause and still understand the sentence
   - Clause uses commas

THAT

- Partners with restrictive clause
- No surrounding commas with the restrictive clause
- If the restrictive clause was removed, the audience will lose essential information about the noun (antecedent).

Examples:
- The questions that were asked were troubling.
  - The questions were troubling.
  - Which questions?
- The lab report was located in the room that was locked.
  - The lab report was located in the room.
  - Which room?
- The foundation that the new company poured was weak.
  - The foundation was weak.
  - Which foundation?
- Museum visitors can see different kinds of tools that were used by the settlers.
  - Museum visitors can see different kinds of tools.
  - Which kinds of tools?
WHICH

- Partners with *nonrestrictive clause*
- Uses commas to surround the nonrestrictive clause
- Indicates that the details in the clause will not impact the sentence meaning.

Examples:

- *Fishing*, which is my father’s favourite activity, is relaxing.
  - *Fishing is relaxing.*
- My class is located in the *Education Building*, which is always hot.
  - *My class is located in the Education Building.*
- *Microwaved popcorn*, which I do not like, is popular with many students.
  - *Microwaved popcorn is popular with many students.*
- The family home, which was declared a heritage property in 1983, was for sale for three years.
  - *The family home was for sale for three years.*