

# ***That, Which, Who***



## **How do “that,” “which,” and “who” function in a sentence?**

The pronouns that, which, and who have a similar function in that they begin clauses that are used to add more detail into the sentence. This added detail shapes how we understand the main part of the sentence. But while these pronouns have a similar function, they tell us different things about how we should consider the information they bring in.

### **When and how do writers use “that”?**

Use that when you want to tell the reader that what you’re about to say is necessary to understand your subject. This is called a restrictive clause: it limits or restricts the identity of the subject in some way.

The car that hit me was blue.

The class that I registered for yesterday is already full.

The word that in these sentences signals to the reader that the information is necessary, rather than incidental, to the meaning of the subject. I cannot remove that clause without changing the meaning of the noun. It was not just any car that hit me; it was the blue car.

### **When and how do writers use “which”?**

Use which when you want to tell the reader that the information you’re about to give is *not* necessary to understand your subject. This is called a nonrestrictive clause: it does not limit the identity of the subject in same way, but offers some sort of additional information.

My yellow sweater, which I received last Christmas, has a tear in the sleeve.

I took the stairs to the fourth floor of Davidson today, which was quite a hike.

Which signals to the reader that the information you are offering is not necessary to understand your subject. The main point of my sentence is that my yellow sweater has a hole in the sleeve; it’s merely incidental information that I received it last Christmas.

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### **When and how do writers use “who”?**

Use who the same way you would use that, except in this case, who must refer to a human subject.

The aunt who sends me Christmas money every year is my favorite.

My classmate who sits behind me wears too much cologne.

Who also implies that the information is essential to understanding your subject, but in this sentence, I am referring to my aunt, who is a person rather than an inanimate object.

### **Are there any strategies for deciding on when to use “that” or “which”?**

Notice that, in these sentences, which usually appears after a comma. The comma is another grammatical convention that marks whether a clause is essential or non-essential to the meaning of the sentence—much like that and which. Keep this in consideration when choosing between that and which: if you would use a comma, choose the word which. If a comma is not appropriate, choose that.