

That vs. Which

Some word usage rules seem purposely designed to make our lives more vexing. One of the greatest problems in business writing, speech, and media today revolves around when to use “that,” when to use “which,” and how to punctuate sentences with either.

Follow these simple rules to keep your message on track.

That — Use “that” to introduce restrictive (or essential) clauses in sentences; do not use a comma.

A restrictive clause is that part of the sentence that contains information the reader needs to understand in order to grasp the main idea.

For example, “Automobiles that look like race cars attract more attention from traffic cops.” The clause, “...that look like race cars,” indicates the writer’s key point in the sentence.

Which — Use “which” to introduce nonrestrictive (nonessential) clauses; precede “which” with a comma.

Nonrestrictive clauses contain information that adds to the reader’s understanding but is unnecessary to the reader’s comprehension.

If the previous example were expanded, it might read, “Automobiles that look like race cars attract more attention from traffic cops, which may account for the increase in my insurance premiums.”

Nonrestrictive clauses are set off from the rest of the sentence in order to demonstrate the nonessential nature of the information.

Using “that” and “which” appropriately as well as punctuating these clauses correctly enhances the precision of your writing. Examine the following two sentences:

1. XYZ Company’s safety procedures, **which are no longer relevant**, should not be followed.
2. XYZ Company’s **safety procedures that are no longer relevant** should not be followed.

In the first sentence, the use of “which” to begin the phrase and commas to offset it gives the reader the impression that **all administrative principles** are irrelevant.

In the second sentence, the use of “that” without commas indicates that only **some administrative principles** are irrelevant.

“Which” indicates unlimited irrelevance, while “that” implies limited relevance.

By mastering the use of “that” and “which,” your readers will better understand your message.