

# How to Use “That” and “Which” Correctly

Some English native speakers and some speakers of English as a second or foreign language are confused with the standard use of “which” and “that.” The use of “which” and “that” is one of the most common linguistic issues that ESL/EFL teachers, as well as editors of native speakers’ writings, deal with. Though the theoretical distinction between “that” and “which” is mainly defined in grammatical terms, their use is primarily governed by the different semantic roles they play in a sentence. The general rule you can use is “that” is for restricting the meaning of the subject, whereas “which” is for decorating the subject without adding to the meaning. In grammatical terms, this conception is rendered to “Restrictive” and “non-restrictive” roles in the clause. Grammatically, a clause is a group of words that encompasses a subject-verb relationship. Semantically, clauses are categorized into restrictive and non-restrictive or essential and non-essential. In British grammar, the terms “defining” and “non-defining” are used to mean the same thing.

## When introducing a non-restrictive clause, use “which.”

- A non-restrictive clause is additional to the sentence and can be deleted without affecting the meaning. This type of clause is always set apart from the rest of the sentence by a pair of commas or just a comma if at the end of the sentence.
- Set the non-restrictive clause off by inserting two commas around it.
  - “The car, which was parked in the parking lot, was stolen.” “Which was parked in the parking lot” is a non-restrictive clause since it does not define the subject “the car,” though it provides some incidental information. Semantically, non-restrictiveness leaves the subject stranded. We do not know which car was stolen because the meaning is simply rendered, “A car was stolen.” The “which” clause provides a generic rather than specific reference for the subject “car.”

## When introducing a restrictive clause, use “that.”

- A restrictive clause is the one that adds to and defines the subject; therefore, it is integral to the meaning of the subject. It restricts the semantic domain of the subject and confines it to one possible interpretation; thus, it is restrictive.
- The “that” clause does not need commas to single it out because it is a part of the sentence meaning.
  - “Cars that use solar power are eco-friendly cars.” Is every car eco-friendly? The use of “that” here is to single out the subject “cars.” The speaker and the listener understand that these specific types of cars are eco-friendly. Semantically, the “that” clause bears a restricting relation with the subject and plays a defining role. The “that” clause provides a specific rather than a generic reference for the subject “cars.”

**If the clause can be deleted without changing the meaning of the sentence, use "which."**

**If deleting the clause changes the meaning of the sentence, use "that."**

## Tips

- "That" is considered as a restrictive element in the clause.
  - "Baby foods that contain less fat are best".
- "Which" is considered a non-restrictive element in the clause.
  - "Reduced fat baby foods, which are my daughter's favourite, work well for her diet."
- Before choosing between "that" and "which," consider the meaning of the sentence carefully.

## Warnings

- In order to control the proper use of "that" and "which" and the difference between restrictive and non-restrictive, one needs to know about the grammatical behaviours and the semantic interpretations of the dependent relative clauses that are introduced by the relative pronouns (that, which, whichever, who, whoever, whom, whomever, whose, and which).

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