

That vs. Which

The relative pronouns “that” and “which” can sometimes cause a bit of confusion for writers regarding both usage and punctuation. Their usage depends on the meaning you’re trying to convey, as well as the context of the sentence itself.

Relative pronouns introduce relative clauses. The relative clause modifies (or *relates to*) a noun in a sentence. Consider the following sentence: The tree that was struck by lightning was cut down. The relative clause “that was struck by lightning” modifies “the tree,” specifying the particular tree that was cut down. Because it *restricts* the interpretation to a particular tree, we call it a *restrictive* relative clause. A restrictive clause provides information that is essential to the meaning we are trying to convey.

Non-restrictive relative clauses provide non-essential information in a sentence; that is, the clause can be deleted without changing the basic meaning or interpretation of the sentence. Consider the following example: The backyard white oak, which was more than 200 years old, was struck by lightning. The relative clause “which was more than 200 years old” modifies “the backyard white oak,” but the information provided is not essential for the reader to know which tree was struck. The relative clause simply supplies additional information about the tree—its age. If the relative clause is deleted from the sentence, the reader still knows the lightning’s victim—the backyard white oak. Clauses that provide non-essential information are “non-restrictive” because the clause *does not restrict* interpretation to a particular meaning.

In the first example—the restrictive relative clause—we used the word “that,” as in “that was struck by lightning.” In the second—the non-restrictive clause—we used “which,” as in “which was more than 200 years old.” We use “that” to introduce restrictive clauses and “which” to introduce non-restrictive clauses.

We also “set-off” non-restrictive clauses with commas, whether they appear in the middle of a sentence—as in the previous example—or at the end of the sentence. Consider the following: One of the longest-lived trees in North America is the white oak, which can live for 500 to 600 years. Again, the age range is interesting, but it’s not essential to the basic meaning of the sentence. Thus, we use the relative pronoun “which,” and we set-off the clause with a comma.

Sometimes the context in which we use the clause will determine whether it’s restrictive or non-restrictive. Consider the following: The shotgun that was loaded with double-aught buckshot went off accidentally. In this case, there must have been multiple shotguns, and we’re specifying the one “that was loaded with double-aught” shot. Now, compare that with the following: The shotgun, which was loaded with double-aught buckshot, went off accidentally. In this case, the reader already knows what gun we’re describing. The clause “which was loaded with double-aught buckshot” isn’t meant to specify the particular gun—it’s meant simply to add some possibly gruesome details.

So when trying to determine whether to use “that” or “which,” ask yourself whether the relative clause—the information following the relative pronoun—is essential to meaning of the basic sentence or if it’s simply adding some related details. If it’s essential, use the word “that.” If it’s simply some related information that could be deleted without changing the basic meaning, use the word “which,” and set it off with punctuation.