

LUC WRITING CENTER – “THAT VS. WHICH”

The Rule

Officially, there is no set rule about using “**that**” or “**which**” in writing. But there is a growing consensus around a simple principle: if the information is necessary to identify the noun (person, place, thing, or idea) you’re referring to, then you won’t use a comma, and you will use the word “that.” If it adds information that is not necessary to identify or define the noun you’re referring to, then you use the word “which,” and you enclose the phrase in a commas.

Example:

The hat that I wore last week needs to be repaired.

You may have many hats, so to tell us which hat you’re speaking about, you use the clause “that I wore last week.” In grammar terminology, this is called a restrictive clause.

The hat, which I wore last week, needs to be repaired.

In the example above, you aren’t identifying the hat. Perhaps you only have one hat, or perhaps your reader already knows the hat you’re referring to. Either way, you’re simply pausing during the sentence to offer extra information, not information that defines or identifies the hat. In grammar terminology, this is called a nonrestrictive clause.

I need to repair the hat, which I wore last week.

In the example above, the phrase still does not serve to identify the hat, so again we use the word “which” to introduce the phrase. Notice the comma usage here, though. Because the sentence ends, we don’t enclose the whole phrase in parentheses.

Try out these rules for yourself. In this sentence should we use “that” or “which” to introduce the phrase between the | marks?

My favorite mug | was red | fell and shattered yesterday.

Answer: “which”

The phrase “My favorite mug” tells us which mug it is, and presumably you have only one favorite. Therefore, the information that it was red is not necessary to identify the mug. Technically, we could imagine a sentence with “that” introducing the phrase (*My favorite mug that was red fell and broke yesterday*). **That sentence would imply, however, that you have many favorite mugs, each in a different color.**

Given the discussion above, should the following sentence include commas? If so, where?

My favorite mug which was red fell and shattered yesterday.

Answer: Yes. The commas enclose the nonrestrictive clause as follows:

My favorite mug, which was red, fell and shattered yesterday.

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Are the “that”/“which” clauses in the following sentences restrictive or nonrestrictive?

1. The book that I just purchased.
2. The book, which I just purchased.
3. I read at the library, which is my favorite place to study.
4. I read at the library that is my favorite place to study.

Answers:

1. Restrictive, 2. Nonrestrictive, 3. Nonrestrictive, 4 Restrictive

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