

Which Vs. That

In spoken English, the words “which” and “that” are often used interchangeably to introduce a clause that further defines or modifies a noun within the sentence. However, in academic writing these two words distinguish two different types of clauses: the restrictive clause and the non-restrictive clause.

Restrictive Clauses:

Any phrase beginning with “that” and following a noun is a restrictive clause because this phrase “restricts” the meaning or specificity of the noun.

Example: Insects that have eight legs are called ‘arachnids’.

In this example, *only* those insects **that have eight legs** can be categorized this way. All other insects are categorized differently. The phrase “that have eight legs” therefore *restricts* the type of insect indicated in the sentence.

Non-restrictive Clauses:

By comparison, any phrase beginning with “which” and following a noun is a non-restrictive clause because the phrase does not change the meaning of the noun in any way, but only adds additional information to that noun.

Example: Spiders, which are a type of insect, are often venomous.

In this example, the intended message in the sentence is “**Spiders are often venomous.**” The information contained in the clause “which are a type of insect” is perhaps *important* to the sentence’s meaning, but not *essential*. It could be removed and the original, intended meaning remains.

If the word “which” is used in the first example, the following sentence is the result:

Insects, which have eight legs, are called ‘arachnids’.



This sentence is problematic because it indicates that *all* insects have eight legs, and therefore implies that *all* insects are also arachnids. It is unlikely that this would be the author’s intended meaning.

Non-restrictive clauses can also complete a sentence.



Example: The first day of school always follows Labor Day, which is a holiday celebrating workers.

Note: the “which” in this sentence adds additional information to “Labor Day” and not to “the first day of school”. In general, “which” refers to the first noun before the comma. If you want to add new information for the subject in the sentence, use “and” after the comma.

Example: The first day of school always follows Labor Day, and is an exciting time for many children.



Commas and “Which”

All of the above examples using “which” include commas. It is not the case, however, that sentences including “which” *always* require commas. Whenever “which” is used as a question word or to indicate preference, no comma is necessary.

Example: Which dress do you think I should wear? I don’t know which looks better.

In addition, the word “which” can be used alongside a preposition to ensure that the sentence does not end with a preposition. In this case, a comma is not needed.

Example: Western is the only school I am applying to. → Western is the only school to which I am applying.

Exercises:

Determine if the following sentences should have restrictive clauses using “that” or non-restrictive clauses using “which”.

- 1) University College **that,which** is the oldest building on campus, was constructed in 1923.
- 2) The red car over there is the one **that,which** scratched your fender.
- 3) The cat **that,which** I saw in our yard yesterday is in the neighbor’s yard today!
- 4) Hockey **that,which** is the most popular sport in Canada, will be an event in the next Olympics.
- 5) The pen **that,which** I had in my pocket exploded and covered me in ink!

Answers:

- 1) University College, which is the oldest building on campus, was constructed in 1923.
- 2) The red car over there is the one that scratched your fender.
- 3) The cat that I saw in our yard yesterday is in the neighbor’s yard today!
- 4) Hockey, which is the most popular sport in Canada, will be an event in the next Olympics.
- 5) The pen that I had in my pocket exploded and covered me in ink!