

WHICH VS THAT: RESTRICTIVE AND NON-RESTRICTIVE CLAUSES



Which and **that** both introduce clauses (groups of words) that provide more information but are **not grammatically necessary** to the sentence.

e.g., *The daily special, **which was poached salmon**, cost a lot.*

e.g., *The dish **that the sous-chef prepared** turned out to be better than the daily special.*



Using Restrictive Clauses: That

Use **that** when the information in the clause is **necessary** to the meaning of the sentence. It's called a restrictive clause because it **limits** or **affects the purpose** of the sentence.

e.g., *Suitcases **that weigh more than 23kg** must be checked.*

that weigh more than 23 kg is necessary to the point of the sentence. If you removed this restrictive clause, it would imply that all suitcases must be checked, which isn't what the author intends.

e.g., *Drinks **that have caffeine** make it hard to fall asleep.*

that have caffeine is also restrictive. If you take this part out, it suggests that all drinks make it hard to fall asleep.



Some writers will use **which** for a restrictive clause instead of **that**. This is technically fine, but if you are having any confusion about the distinctions between restrictive and non-restrictive clauses, it is better to maintain a clear distinction between **that** and **which**, for clarity's sake.

Using Non-Restrictive Clauses: Which

Use **which** when the information in the clause is **not necessary** to the meaning of the sentence. It might be helpful or interesting, but if you took it out, the sentence would still make sense.

e.g., *The suitcase, **which was stuffed with dirty clothes**, didn't fit in the overhead bin.*

If **which** was removed:

e.g., *The suitcase didn't fit in the overhead bin.*

e.g., *Coffee and tea, **which both have caffeine**, are Canada's favourite morning drinks.*

If **which** was removed:

e.g., *Coffee and tea are Canada's favourite morning drinks.*

Note that the non-restrictive **which** clause is set off by commas.



Use **that** without commas for a **restrictive** (necessary) clause. **That** is required more often than **which**. Use **which** with commas for a **non-restrictive** (not necessary) clause.



Practice

Write in that or which and add in commas if necessary.

- 1 The spoon _____ fell on the floor needed to be washed.
- 2 The book _____ she wanted was on the top shelf.
- 3 They used Post-It notes _____ come in various colours to organize the pages.
- 4 For the hike I need shoes _____ are sturdy.
- 5 For the hike I need sturdy shoes _____ are expensive.
- 6 The first skyscraper we saw _____ was the biggest one on that street had 67 floors.
- 7 The only elevator _____ went all the way to the top was out of service.
- 8 The cord _____ charges this computer is missing.
- 9 He provided us with a whole box of samples _____ we didn't really need so we could make a decision.

Answer key:

- | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|-------|---|------|---|-------|---|-------|---|-------|
| 1 | that | 2 | that | 3 | which | 4 | that | 5 | which |
| 6 | which | 7 | that | 8 | that | 9 | which | | |