

That or Which

It often seems that the words *that* and *which* can be used interchangeably, without losing meaning. *That* and *which*, however, have specific meanings for different situations.

Adjective Clauses

Both *that* and *which* are used in adjective clauses—clauses that modify nouns or pronouns. In this case, *which* is used to modify the noun or pronoun as long as the modifying phrase is not essential to the meaning of the sentence.

The café, *which* is open until 6 pm every day, serves organic coffee.

The main point of the above sentence is that the café serves organic coffee, not that it is open until 6 pm every day. If the modification of the noun or pronoun is essential to the meaning of the sentence, however, *that* is used instead of *which*.

Cafés *that* serve organic coffee are better than other cafés.

The phrase in this case is essential to the main point of the sentence, as it is specifically cafés that serve organic coffee that are better than other cafés.

Nonessential Elements vs. Essential Elements

Similar to the above example, *which* is used at the beginning of phrases that are not essential to the meaning of the sentence, and are set off by commas.

The road *that* leads to the cottage, *which* is made of gravel, is long and winding.

The main point of the sentence is that the road leading to the cabin is long and winding, not that it is made of gravel. A helpful method to use when checking a sentence to see if an element is essential or not is to read the sentence without the element you believe to be nonessential.

The road *that* leads to the cottage is long and winding.

The nonessential phrase can be removed without losing any meaning. The commas, in this case, work to separate the nonessential element from the rest of the sentence.

Alternative Scenario

Not all writers reserve the use of *which* for nonessential elements. *Which*, in other words, can be used interchangeably with *that* if the writer believes that it works better. Either of the following examples is correct.

Jonathan picked up the magazine *which* Maggie had purchased.

Jonathan picked up the magazine *that* Maggie had purchased.

Sources

Aaron, J. E., & McArthur, M. (2003). *The little brown compact handbook* (2nd ed.). Longman.