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 terms of use, 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 bar, *which* is open until 2 am every night, serves European beer.

The main point of the above sentence is that the bar serves European beer, not that it is open until 2 am every night. If the modification of the noun or pronoun is essential to the meaning of the sentence, however, *that* is used instead of *which*.

Bars *that* serve European beer are better than other bars.

The modifying phrase in this case is essential to the main point of the sentence, as it is specifically bars that serve European beer that are better than other bars. (Aaron, 163)

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 through without the element you believe to be nonessential.

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

The non-essential phrase can be removed without losing any meaning. The phrase beginning with *which* merely clarifies the noun "road". The commas, in this case, work to separate the nonessential element from the rest of the sentence (Aaron, 242-43).

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.

Both *that* and *which* can introduce essential elements of a sentence, but only *which* can be used to introduce a nonessential element. Most commonly, *that* is used for essential elements and *which* is used for nonessential elements, set off by commas.

Aaron, Jane E. and Murray McArthur. *The Little Brown Compact Handbook*. 2nd ed. Toronto: Longman, 2003.

You have the tools. We'll help you use them.