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Word for Word

Don't let *that* and *which* bowl you over!

In written American English, the pronoun *that* is used to introduce a restrictive clause and the pronoun *which* is used to introduce a nonrestrictive clause. In other words, *that* introduces a clause used to specify or identify a noun, and *which* introduces additional information about a noun that has already been identified.

Examples:
The physician recommended eating foods that are high in fiber.

The physician recommended eating lentils, which are high in fiber.

In the first sentence, *that* introduces information that is necessary to distinguish what kind of food is being recommended. Without the words following *that*, the meaning of the sentence would change: The physician recommended eating foods. This sentence would leave the reader guessing what types of foods were recommended.

In the second sentence, the type of food being recommended is already identified. *Which* introduces new information about that food,

but without these words the meaning of the sentence would still be clear: The physician recommended eating lentils.

You may have noticed that in the examples above, *which* is preceded by a comma while *that* is not. This is because *that* introduces a restrictive clause (information that is essential to the meaning of the sentence) and *which* introduces a nonrestrictive clause (nonessential information).

Example:
The retrovirus was expressed in each of the tissue samples that had been extracted from the patients with pancreatic cancer.

The retrovirus was expressed in each of the tissue samples, which we analyzed by flow cytometry.

Although both sentences begin the same way, the first sentence uses *that* to limit the meaning of the phrase "each of the tissue samples" to a particular subset of samples while the second sentence uses *which* to add information about "each of the tissue samples" without changing its essential meaning.

Example:
The tortoise that had been bowled over lost the race to the other tortoise, which was upright.

In this example, the wording "which was upright" provides more information about the other tortoise, but that information is not essential.

Bibliography

The Chicago Manual of Style, 15th ed. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press; 2003.
Bernstein TM. *The Careful Writer: A Modern Guide to English Usage*, 9th ed. New York, NY: Atheneum; 1984.

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