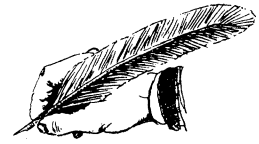


That or Which?



Authors who are not sure whether to use *that* or *which* tend to use *which* excessively. Consequently, editors and reviewers who try to correct such errors sometimes are called “which-hunters.”

The distinction between *that* and *which* is important for clear expression. Consider these two sentences:

The herbicides that were applied postemergence controlled crabgrass.

The herbicides, which were applied postemergence, controlled crabgrass.

In the first sentence, herbicides were applied in more than one way, but only those applied postemergence controlled crabgrass. “That were applied postemergence” is a *RESTRICTIVE CLAUSE* because it describes only a restricted part of the subject it modifies. In the second sentence, herbicides were applied in only one way, and a clause is added to tell what that way was. “Which were applied postemergence” is a *NON-RESTRICTIVE* or *DESCRIPTIVE* clause. Such clauses apply to all of the subject modified, and simply add more information about it.

Another example:

The weeds that emerged with the crop grew taller than the crop plants.

The weeds, which emerged with the crop, grew taller than the crop plants.

In the first sentence, some weeds grew taller than the crop plants, while others did not. The restrictive clause tells which ones these were. In the second sentence, all the weeds grew taller than the crop plants. The non-restrictive clause simply adds the information that these weeds emerged with the crop.

And another:

The wheat that was seeded in early September yielded 100 bushels per acre.

The wheat, which was seeded in early September, yielded 100 bushels per acre.

In the first sentence, wheat was seeded at more than one time, but the restrictive clause tells us that only the wheat seeded in early September yielded 100 bushels per acre. In the second sentence, wheat was seeded only once, and the non-restrictive clause tells us when.

The following rule governs whether to use *that* or *which*:

If the clause describes *ALL* of the antecedent noun, it is non-restrictive, and uses *which* and commas.

If the clause describes *ONLY PART* of the antecedent noun, it is restrictive, and uses *that* without commas.

A common mistake is to use *which* instead of *that* in restrictive clauses.

Evidently, the choice was optional in the past, but the trend today is definitely toward strict distinction. This is good, because both a different word and the presence or absence of commas define the meaning clearly.

Remember:

Use *which* and commas when the clause
Describes the subject's whole;
But to describe a certain part,
Then *that* must play the role.

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