

## “Which is Which?” *and* “That is That!”

Although “which” and “that” are used interchangeably in speech, a distinction between the two should be made in writing. Selecting the correct word is not mere hair-splitting pedantry—a subtle but definite distinction in meaning is involved, which is conveyed by inflection in speech but that is lost in writing.

Both are used to introduce subordinate clauses, which convey additional information in the sentence. “Which” is used to introduce *nonrestrictive* subordinate clauses—clauses that contain interesting additional, but nonessential, information. *Restrictive* clauses are introduced by “that” and include information integral to the meaning of the sentence. Nonrestrictive clauses (“which” clauses) are set off from the main body of the sentence by commas; restrictive clauses (“that” clauses) are not. “That” clauses *define*; “which” clauses *expand*.

If you are unsure whether a clause is restrictive or nonrestrictive, try leaving it out to see if the sentence sounds complete and makes sense without it. If the sentence doesn’t sound sensible, the clause is restrictive and should begin with “that.” Examples of both types of sentences are given below. Remember, even though we all violate this convention in speech, writing must be more precise, and technical writing requires the most exactitude of all.

“Non-restrictive clauses, *which* are always set off by commas, are not integral to communicating the meaning of a sentence.” “Clauses that are essential to understanding the meaning of the sentence must not be set off with commas.” Here are two more examples:

“The ax, which is in the garage, must be sharpened before it is used.”

“The ax that is in the garage must be sharpened before it is used.”

The first sentence implies only one rather peripatetic ax, *which* might be anyplace but happens to be residing in the garage at the moment. The second sentence carries the connotation of multiple axes—one in the basement, one in the woodshed, one under Aunt Hattie’s bed—but it is the GARAGE ax *that* requires attention.

The foregoing example seems silly. But look at the ambiguity that arises in scientific writing when the wrong word is used:

“In work with Delbourgo and White, she completely solved the anharmonic Grassmann oscillator which is the fermionic analogue of the ordinary anharmonic oscillator.”

The question is, what did Professor Jones solve? Is there only one anharmonic Grassmann oscillator? Or are there multiple anharmonic Grassmann oscillators, and she solved the one that is the fermionic analogue of the ordinary anharmonic oscillator? Written and punctuated as shown, it is impossible to tell from this sentence how many anharmonic Grassmann oscillators there are and which one Professor Jones solved.