

Which vs. That

“Which” and “that” are two of the most commonly confused words in English, especially because they often appear in similar sentence structures. Fortunately, there’s a simple rule to help you decide which one to use.

The key: understanding the difference between a restrictive clause and a non-restrictive clause.

If you can identify which kind of clause your are dealing with, you’re more than halfway there!

Restrictive clause

A restrictive clause gives essential information about the noun it follows. If you remove the clause, the meaning of the sentence changes or becomes unclear.

For example:

Employees who don’t show up on time will get a warning.

→ The clause “who don’t show up on time” is essential.

It tells us which employees are affected. Without it, the sentence is incomplete or too vague.

Key features of a restrictive clause:

- No commas are used
- Often introduced with “that” (especially when referring to objects or things)
- Helps identify or define a specific person, group, or item

Non-restrictive clause

A non-restrictive clause gives extra, non-essential information about a noun. The sentence still makes sense – and remains grammatically complete – even if the clause is removed.

For example:

The employees, who have worked here since high school, always dine together.

→ The clause “who have worked here since high school” adds detail, but it is not essential to understanding who is being referred to.

Without it: The employees always dine together. The sentence still works.

Key features of a non-restrictive clause:

- Uses commas to set the clause apart
- Introduced with “which” (for things) or “who” (for people)
- Adds detail, but does not define or narrow the noun

Let’s apply what we’ve learned with a simple decision process:

Restrictive clause → essential information → no commas → use: **that**

- *The article that you gave me was useful.*

The clause is needed to know which article = no comma, use that.

Non-restrictive clause → extra information → commas → use: **which**

- *The student handbook, which is available online, has all the policies.*

The clause adds detail, but the sentence would still make sense without it.

Quick decision guide

