

Grammar & Punctuation: Which or That?

“Which” and “that” are similar in meaning but are usually not interchangeable. This handout clarifies when you should use “which” and when should you use “that.”

Which

Use for non-essential (non-restrictive) clauses

Use commas with “which” clauses

That

Use for essential (restrictive) clauses

Do not use commas with “that” clauses

Read the examples below to learn more about when to use “which” and “that.”

Example 1

In 1977 pregnant women were discouraged from eating Lake Michigan trout, which contained high levels of polychlorinated biphenyls.

This sentence suggests that pregnant women were discouraged from eating all Lake Michigan trout—which all contained high levels of PCBs. The “which” clause is non-essential (non-restrictive); this means that we could remove the “which” clause without changing the intent of the sentence, which is to tell readers that pregnant women were discouraged from eating Lake Michigan trout (which, by the way, contained high levels of PCBs). Because the clause is non-essential, it (a) starts with “which” and (b) is set off with a comma from the rest of the sentence.

Example 2

In 1977 pregnant women were discouraged from eating Lake Michigan trout that contained high levels of polychlorinated biphenyls.

The second sentence says that pregnant women were discouraged from eating only those Lake Michigan trout that contained high levels of PCBs and suggests that there may have been other Lake Michigan trout that did not have high levels of PCBs. The “that” clause is essential (restrictive) because it identifies which of the Lake Michigan trout that pregnant women were discouraged from eating (only those with high levels of PCBs). We cannot remove the clause from the sentence without changing the intent of the sentence, which is to tell readers about the kind of Lake Michigan trout pregnant women should not eat. Because the clause is essential, the clause (a) starts with “that” and (b) is not set off with a comma from the rest of the sentence.

Remember:

Which = non-essential information = commas

That = essential information = no commas