

WRITING CENTER

That vs Which vs Who

That, **which**, and **who** are words (relative pronouns) **which** signal to a person **who** is reading or writing **that** a group of words form a dependent or subordinate clause. When should each be used?

First of all, use **who** only with people and sometimes with animals that seem almost human.

- *I noticed a man **who** had tattoos of snakes adorning his forehead and cheeks.*
- *The dog **who** greeted them with a toothy grin was hers.*

But what about **that** and **which**? Writers often struggle in their choices between the two. There are a few easy rules to help lessen the confusion which these two simple words create.

Use **that** to refer to animals and things and anonymous groups of people.

- *The pet shop charged twenty dollars for the guinea pig **that** I wanted.*
- *The box **that** she chose was decorated with sequins and ribbons.*
- *We enjoyed the band **that** played at intermission.*

Use **that** with **restrictive clauses**, so called because they restrict the meaning to a specific thing. The previous three examples are restrictive clauses because they point to a particular guinea pig, box, and band. Note that commas are **not** used with restrictive clauses.

Use **which** to refer to animals and things. **Which** can be used for **both restrictive and nonrestrictive** clauses.

- *The lecture **which** he attended was interesting and informative.*
- *The bird, **which** is on the endangered species list, is an eagle.*
- *Thank you for the gift of chocolates, **which** I truly enjoyed.*

In the above examples, **which** is first used with a nonrestrictive clause, as shown both by the reference to a particular lecture and the lack of comma usage (the word **that** would also be acceptable in the sentence.).

In the next two sentences, commas are used because the clauses that they introduce could be omitted, and the meanings of the sentences would not be changed.

Some authorities, including the APA Style Manual, recommend that, to avoid confusion, **which** be used only for nonrestrictive clauses.