

Communication 4312 -- That and Which

One of the niceties of the language is a rule of thumb involving that and which. Because writing has so much to do with relationships, understanding the difference in that and which and learning how to use them in this certain way can be helpful.

The rule is this: Use that in restrictive or essential constructions, which in nonrestrictive or nonessential constructions. These sentences demonstrate the difference:

The river that flows through Dallas is the Trinity.
The Trinity River, which flows through Dallas, is muddy.

A question is: Is the word that bad? It can be overused. It can be used unnecessarily. Some writers need to use that. To them, the sentence reads better with a that. Some readers find a well-placed that comforting.

What's important is not to impose one's subjective view on another. Such imposition in editing is bad, anyway. However, the editor needs to be aware of possible overuse. A rule of thumb would be to avoid that whenever possible. Notice, though, that some sentences can be misleading if the that is omitted:

The police disclosed a girl was missing.

A better question is: Is which bad? The answer is yes, except after a preposition (of which) or in a nonrestrictive phrase. Why? Which is a harsh word. It creates a much rougher relationship in the sentence than other words would.

As to the question of whether the words that and which are interchangeable, the answer is absolutely not. They should serve two entirely different purposes in the sentence.

That should be used to show a direct, integral relationship. Which should be used to show a relationship that is not vital to the meaning of the sentence. Don't use which to tie two parts of a sentence together that are necessary (see that which would have been the wrong word in this sentence) to each other.

A good example of when that should be used instead of which:

This is the day that we've been looking forward to.

Do not use which as a substitute for that in such constructions as:
... the car which, ... the building which, ...the class which, etc.

Use who, not that or which, when referring to people.

Here are sentences in which that would have been better than which:

The newspaper which is free of grammatical errors will delight readers who respect correct usage.

Brigham Young, ranked No. 13, has another sensational quarterback and an offense which has scored 364 points in eight game.

Which is often indicative of yet another problem in relationships within a sentence. Which may be used to add something in the sentence that is not related to the part of the sentence it has been added to. This creates a run-on effect with the which introducing information that has no antecedent or a fuzzy one at best.

Examples:

... made the score 42-24, which was the beginning of the end.

... told Smith he should get the promotion next month, which is what he wanted to hear.

A basic rule of structure is that elements placed adjacent to each other in a sentence must meet the test of logical relationship.

Here is an example of the sentence in which the which construction has been used to put together information that isn't related:

Not much of a crowd was attracted for the tournament last winter, which was held at Burns Park.

Especially don't let a which construction modify a noun followed by a preposition on the assumption that somehow or other that can work.

To emphasize the rule: Which must be with the word it modifies. You can't say that, well, everybody knows what was meant and everybody got the idea. That's not the point. The point is that tightness of structure demands logical and technical cohesiveness.

Here are sentences in which the which construction tries to modify the noun, but in each a prepositional phrase gets in the way:

The motto of *The New York Times*, which the newspaper proudly displays every day on its front page, is, "All The News That's Fit to Print."

This was in spite of the ethics code of the Newspaper Food Editors and Writers, which suggests that such offers can compromise the journalist's credibility.

He read a handwritten letter from Mrs. Robert Prentice asking for help in reopening investigation into the recent murder of her husband, which Scotland Yard has failed to solve.

That can create relationships that don't exist, too, as in this sentence:

Writing coach Paula LaRocque gets pleasure from an oil painting by an Arlington artist that hangs in her office.

■ David McHam