

Incorrect usage of common words such as "that," "which," "it," and "it's" occurs all the time in writing, and while they're simple errors, they separate good writing from bad. Correct use of these words in a cover letter or email correspondence can speak volumes about your overall communication skills. Mastery of usage will give you an edge in your schoolwork and your job search, and it can impact your writing as you launch your career.

## 1) "That" vs. "Which"

**Use "that" when introducing essential clauses. Use "which" when introducing nonessential clauses. Also, clauses modified by "which" are generally set off with commas, while clauses modified by "that" are not set off by commas.**

Incorrect: The Sarbanes-Oxley Act that passed in July 2002 established new corporate governance policies.  
Correct: The Sarbanes-Oxley Act, which passed in July 2002, established new corporate governance policies.

Only one Sarbanes-Oxley Act exists, so the clause stating that the Act passed in July 2002 is nonessential; therefore, use "which" to modify the clause.

**How correctly using "that" vs. "which" clarifies your writing:**

Example 1: Would you review the enclosed resume that lists my pertinent consulting experience?

Example 2: Would you review the enclosed resume, which lists my pertinent consulting experience?

The first example implies that you have multiple versions of your resume and that you are submitting a version targeted specifically at consulting companies. The second example implies that you have one resume, which you have tailored to reflect your consulting experiences.

**When in doubt? If you see commas, use which. If you don't, use that.**

## 2) "Its" vs. "It's"

These two terms are often used interchangeably. Mastering their usage will set your writing apart.

**"It's" is a contraction of "it is" or "it has."**

Usage: It's time for lunch.

Usage: I looked over your resume – it's very good.

**"Its" is the possessive form of it.**

Usage: The computer has its own external hard drive.

Usage: The little bird lost some of its feathers.

**When in doubt? If you can replace the word with "it is" or "it has," use "it's." Otherwise, it's always "its."**

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