



tipsheet

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Using "That" vs. "Which"

While many people in the professional world improperly use "that" and "which" on a daily basis without negative repercussions, appropriate use of the two modifiers helps clarify writing, leaving little room for readers to confuse what we're trying to say.

The Rule

Use "that" when introducing essential clauses and use "which" when introducing nonessential clauses. In addition, clauses modified by "which" are always set off with commas, while clauses modified by "that" are not set off by commas.

Some Examples

Incorrect usage: The energy company, *which* improperly inflated its reported revenue last year, had to pay \$5 million in fines.

Correct usage: The energy company *that* improperly inflated its reported revenue last year had to pay \$5 million in fines.

Unless readers already understand from previous context which energy company you are referring to, you must use "that" to specifically distinguish the law-breaking energy company from other energy companies.

Incorrect usage: The Sarbanes-Oxley Act *that* passed in July 2002 established new corporate governance policies in the wake of multiple U.S. accounting scandals.

Correct usage: The Sarbanes-Oxley Act, *which* passed in July 2002, established new corporate governance policies in the wake of multiple U.S. accounting scandals.

In this case, only one Sarbanes-Oxley Act exists, so the clause stating that the Act passed in July 2002 is nonessential and you should use "which" to modify it.

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

Two examples:

- 1) Would you review the enclosed resume *that* lists my pertinent consulting experience?
- 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.

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