

That or Which?

Rule 1.

According to *The Grammar Bible*,

"**That** refers to people, animals, or things.

The woman **that** witnessed the shooting will testify tomorrow.

The camel **that** carried us through the desert has died.

The explorers found the cave **that** hid the treasure for so many years.

Which refers to animals and things, never to people.

The dog **which** tipped over my garbage can needs a shorter leash.

The crowd cheered as the plane **which** had flown around the world landed (Strumpf 198).

Rule 2.

Use "that" when the phrase following "that" is essential. For example:

Buy the dress that is red and blue.

As you can see, "red and blue" is essential to the instruction to "buy the dress" and therefore is prefaced by "that." Without "red and blue," you might buy the wrong dress.

Use "which" when the phrase is merely an add-on thought or not essential.

She bought a lovely dress, which was red and blue.

Here the sentence says that "she bought a lovely dress," but "red and blue" is just an add-on thought. If you eliminated "red and blue" the basic intent of the sentence remains unchanged: she bought a lovely dress.

If you are defining something by distinguishing it from a larger class of which it is a member, use 'that': 'I chose the lettuce that had the fewest wilted leaves.' When the general class is not being limited or defined in some way, then 'which' is appropriate: 'He made an iceberg lettuce Caesar salad, which didn't taste right'.

Rule 3.

We use "that" when we want to restrict our subject to some smaller subset, by using the descriptive phrase that follows that. Hence:

Please pick up the clothes that you dropped off at the dry cleaners yesterday.

I don't just want you to pick up any old clothes; I want you to pick up the ones you dropped off yesterday. No other clothes will do. Hence, I use the restrictive "that" to tell you exactly what clothes I want you to pick up.

Compare this with the correct unrestrictive usage of "which":

When I was a junior in college I drove a lime-green 1977 chevy, which I bought with the pittance I earned in my summer job with Greenpeace.

The clause following "which" doesn't tell us information we have to have in order to know which car it is.

Even if we don't know that you spent your summer haranguing people to wear hemp shoes, we would still know exactly what car we're talking about: your car, the unfortunately colored American gas-guzzler that leaks oil and parallel parks about as well as the Love Boat. The information provided by our descriptive clause is interesting, but not necessary for us to identify its subject.

www.drgrammar.org/faqs/

<http://www.sunspeks.com/writing/writing3.html>

<http://www.janegalt.net/blog/archives/001507.html>