That vs. Which

**When should I use “that”?**
Use the word “that” in a *restrictive clause*. A restrictive clause is an adjective clause that cannot be omitted from a sentence without affecting the meaning of a sentence. Because it contains essential information, a restrictive clause is **not** set off with a comma.

E.g., The picture that was hanging in the hallway was stolen.

The clause *that was hanging in the hallway* restricts the meaning of *the picture*, so the information is restrictive. Therefore, use “that” to connect the clause to the rest of the sentence.

**When should I use “which”?**
Use the word “which” in a *nonrestrictive clause*. A nonrestrictive clause describes a noun or pronoun whose meaning has already been clearly defined. Because it contains non-essential information, a nonrestrictive clause **is** set off with a comma.

E.g., The picture, which was hanging in the hallway, was stolen.

The clause *which was hanging in the hallway* does not restrict the meaning of *the picture*, so the information is nonrestrictive. Therefore, a comma is needed to isolate the clause in the sentence.

On occasion, it can be difficult to tell whether a clause is restrictive or nonrestrictive without seeing it in context. The following sentences are both correct; however, their meanings are slightly different:

- The cake, made with buttercream frosting, was decadent.
- The cake made with buttercream frosting was decadent.

The first example implies that there was only one cake, and the speaker specifies the frosting in order to enliven the description. The second example, without commas, implies that there are two or more desserts, and the writer is specifying which one was decadent.

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**Additional References:**
