

That Pesky Word “That”

Stan C. Smith

Let’s face it, language is changing. Typical writing styles are becoming more streamlined, resulting in faster-paced scenes and stories. But how do you know which words are superfluous? Today let’s take a look at that pesky word “that.”

I have to admit... I used to use the word *that* all the time in my writing. If you compare my early books to my more recent books, the difference is noticeable. I take comfort, though, in the fact that I am apparently continuing to learn.

Also, if you were to read my novel *Savage*, you will see numerous uses of the word. In that case, the heavy use was intentional. Why? Because the book is the field journal of an English naturalist, written in 1868. In the nineteenth century, the word *that* was used far more frequently than today, especially by people who wrote more formally.

Where to begin? The word *that* is used in several different way, so this gets kind of confusing. First, let’s consider how the word is properly used. We’ll start with *This* versus *That*.



That

Meaning 1: Used to introduce an exclamatory clause.

Example: Kelly said *that* she met the president of the student-run organization at a party.

Meaning 2: Used to identify a person, an event etc. as mentioned before.

Example: We were introduced at a party and after *that* we met quite often.

Meaning 3: Used as a demonstrative pronoun or adjective.

Examples: *That’s* a nice dress. (pronoun)

What are you going to do about *that*? (pronoun)

That mountain looks so small from here. (adjective)

Several people were injured from *that* incident. (adjective)

This

Meaning 1: Something that is close at hand and under immediate observation.

Example: The boss said, “We will continue *this* discussion tomorrow morning.”

Meaning 2: Someone or something near in place or time.

Example: Sam said to me, “*This* is the instructor I wanted you to meet.”

Meaning 3: Something that has been indicated in a subsequent expression.

Example: The teacher said, “*This* is what I want to tell you about fruits—they are the best source of vitamins and minerals.”

Difference Between This and That

THIS VERSUS THAT	
Used with things closer to the speaker	Used with things farther away from the speaker
Used in introductions	Not used in introductions
Cannot be used as a relative pronoun	Can be used as a relative pronoun

Pediaa.com

This is used with things closer to the speaker.

That is used with things farther away from the speaker.

Example: *That shop is better than this one.*

Introduction

This is used in introductions.

That is not used in introductions.

Example: *This is my friend, Bubba.*

Relative Pronoun (a pronoun that is used to refer to a noun mentioned previously)

This cannot be used as a relative pronoun.

That can be used as a relative pronoun.

Example: *I saw the chimpanzee that escaped from the zoo.*

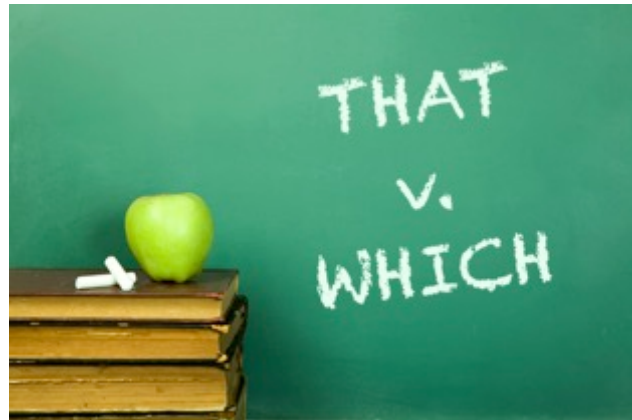
Next let's look at *That* versus *Which*.

According to the *Chicago Manual of Style*, both **that** and **which** can be used as...

relative pronouns.

Remember, a relative pronoun is used to refer to a noun mentioned previously.

But when to use *that* and when to use *which*?
Here's the best way to remember:



Use **that** when it is followed by something that *cannot* be removed from the sentence (if you remove it, the sentence will not work).

Examples:

Any building that is taller must be outside the state.

(If you remove *that is taller*, the sentence does not make sense.)

All visitors that are underaged must be accompanied by their parents

(If you remove *that are underaged*, the sentence does not make sense.)

Use **which** when it is followed by something that *can* be removed from the sentence

Examples:

Alongside the officer trotted a toy poodle, which is hardly a typical police dog.

(If you remove *which is hardly a typical police dog*, the sentence still makes sense.)

My house, which is located in Texas, was built fifty years ago.

(If you remove *which is located in Texas*, the sentence still makes sense.)

Look at these two:

1. *The long letter THAT I received yesterday came from New Zealand.*
2. *The long letter, WHICH I received yesterday, came from New Zealand.*

Notice that the meanings are different. The first states that you received numerous long letters but you are talking about the one you received yesterday. The second states that you only received one long letter, and it came from New Zealand.

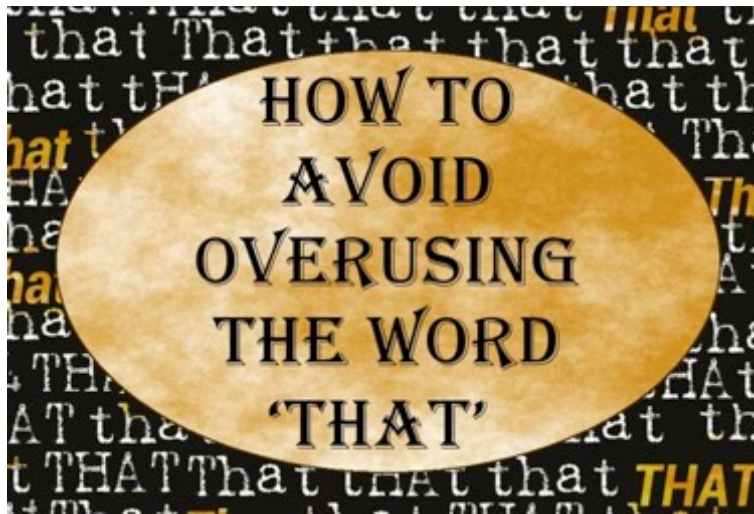
IMPORTANT (see the two sentences above):

When you use **that** as a relative pronoun, you do *not* put a comma before it.

When you use **which** as a relative pronoun, you *must* put a comma before it.

A few more examples:

- *There are lots of things **that** I need to buy before the trip.*
- *They've got a machine **that** prints names on badges.*
- *They didn't have the book **that** I wanted.*
- *The car was pulling a trailer, **which** carried a boat.*
- *I saw him do his one-man show in London, **which** I loved.*
- *The house, **which** was completed in 1856, was famous for its huge marble staircase.*



All those rules seem pretty solid—why all this talk about eliminating the word *that* from your writing?

The easiest form of the word to eliminate is when it is used to *introduce an exclamatory clause*.

Example from earlier:

Kelly said that she met the president of the student-run organization at a party.

Let's remove that:

Kelly said she met the president of the student run organization at a party.

The sentence still makes sense, and I would argue that it is improved.

In fact, the sentence I just wrote above would be better without *that*:

The sentence still makes sense, and I would argue it is improved.

A good rule of thumb: You can probably drop *that* if it follows a verb that essentially means “to say.” Examples:

The children claimed that an ice cream break would help them study more effectively.

She insisted that she wasn't responsible for the houseplant's untimely death.

But... it's probably better to leave it in if other words fall between the verb and the dependent clause:

The kids also said this morning that a television break would enhance their studying.

She admitted begrudgingly that she might have contributed to the plant's demise.

IMPORTANT: Sometimes it is grammatically correct to use *that* two times in a row:

He confessed that that plan had been formulated on three hours of sleep.

BUT... this is awkward and should be avoided. Change the sentence to eliminate the problem:

He confessed that they had only slept three hours when they formulated that plan.

In fact, I would eliminate the first *that* in the revised sentence above:

He confessed they had only slept three hours when they formulated that plan.

MOST IMPORTANT!! A good rule of thumb: to see if you can remove the word *that*, check how naturally and intelligibly the sentence reads without it.

Recent examples from my Reader Magnet FUSED. These are all examples where my editor suggested I remove (or change) the word *that*. What are your thoughts on each of these?

“I sense *that* the arm is within the creature’s digestive tract.”

His leg was a godawful mess—gashes *that were* longer than his hand, bulging masses of red muscle tissue, and white bone fragments clinging to shredded strands of ligament.

“I did do it myself, but I can only perform tasks *that* you request.”

Her brows moved in such a way *that* he was sure she was rolling her eyes.

If I detect such evidence, I will speak to you again so *that* you may explain the situation

Bobby sensed *that* the entity had already gone dormant.

As Ashley had predicted, he rubbed the clay onto the cover, smearing it over a shirtless guy *that* looked like he might be a vampire.