

Using *that* vs. *which*

Most experienced writers distinguish between the use of the relative pronouns *that* and *which*. Remember, *that* emphasizes the meaning of the clause; *which* de-emphasizes the meaning, and de-emphasized clauses are most often sandwiched by non-restrictive commas.

Examples

1. The snap peas, which were planted a week ago, are sprouting with vigor.
2. The heirloom variety of lettuce that cost a bundle per seed has not grown much at all.

Sample Sentences

Punctuate appropriately the italicized wording.

1. The bookstore *that advertised everything 75% off* had wildly inflated prices.
2. The books_{,} *which had been recently cleaned*_{,} sat quietly on their shelves.
3. Wandering the cluttered stacks_{,} *which smelled of book dust*, the young woman located a sturdy copy of Cicero's *Offices*.
4. Next to that volume sat a copy of the Second Philippic_{,} *which included notes in German*.
5. Nearby was a series of titles *that described Egyptian reed weaving*.
6. One text_{,} *which had been much thumbed through*_{,} fell open to a page describing cats.

Tom Kinsella 1/29/11 4:17 PM

Comment [1]: The comma after "dust" is standard, marking the conclusion of the introductory phrase. The comma after "stacks" is optional and depends on how much you care to de-emphasize "which smelled of book dust." The current punctuation de-emphasizes it most.

Tom Kinsella 1/29/11 4:19 PM

Comment [2]: This is interesting. I have punctuated the relative clause as non-restrictive, but you might consider it to be parenthetical. Either way the punctuation remains the same.

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The following sentences are incorrectly punctuated. In what way(s)?

7. Who would have thought ~~+~~ that mushy potatoes could be so offensive?

Tom Kinsella 1/29/11 4:21 PM

Comment [3]: The final clause is the direct object and should not be set apart with a comma.

8. Who would have believed that the first triumvirate{,} which included Caesar, Pompey{,} and Crassus, could have taken such effective control of Rome?

Tom Kinsella 1/29/11 4:21 PM

Comment [4]: The first added comma is necessary; the second is a judgment call.

Should the following sentences use *which* or *that*? Is the punctuation okay?

9. A well-stocked library that adheres to its mission will have many books on many subjects.

Tom Kinsella 1/29/11 4:22 PM

Comment [5]: "That" makes sense; the punctuation is good.

10. The potato chips that the two children had devoured induced their illness.

The potato chips{,} which the two children had devoured{,} induced their illness.

Tom Kinsella 1/29/11 4:24 PM

Comment [6]: Either sentence *could* be right, but given the sense, I'd opt for the first version.

11. Every bathtub that he had scrubbed was clean.

Every bathtub, which he had scrubbed{,} was clean.

Tom Kinsella 1/29/11 4:25 PM

Comment [7]: Same as number 10. I'd still go with the first version.

12. The freakish storm, which dropped tennis-ball-sized hail stones, was unexpected.

Tom Kinsella 1/29/11 4:27 PM

Comment [8]: How you word and punctuate this is a matter of opinion. I enjoy the emphasis on the unexpected freakish storm, so I'll go with this punctuation. You could certainly write, "The freakish storm that dropped tennis-ball-sized hail stones was unexpected."