Who vs That vs Which

That, which, and who are words (relative pronouns) which signal to a person who is reading or writing that a group of words form a dependent or subordinate clause. When should each be used?

WHO

Use who only with people and sometimes with animals that seem almost human.

- I noticed a man who had tattoos of snakes adorning his forehead and cheeks.
- The dog who greeted them with a toothy grin was hers.

THAT

Use that to refer to animals and things and anonymous groups of people.

- The pet shop charged twenty dollars for the guinea pig that I wanted.
- The box that she chose was decorated with sequins and ribbons.
- We enjoyed the band that played at intermission.

Use that with restrictive clauses. A restrictive clause defines the meaning of a noun by providing necessary information that cannot be omitted about the noun in the sentence. Note that commas are not used with restrictive clauses.

WHICH

Use which to refer to animals and things. Unlike that, which can be used for both restrictive and nonrestrictive clauses.

- The lecture which he attended was interesting and informative.
- The bird, which is on the endangered species list, is an eagle.
- Thank you for the gift of chocolates, which I truly enjoyed.

In the above examples, which is first used with a restrictive clause as shown by the lack of commas on either side of the clause (the word that would also be acceptable in the sentence).

In the next two sentences, commas are used to signify a nonrestrictive clause that could be omitted, and the meanings of the sentences would not be changed.

For easier memorization and use, some authorities, including the APA Style Manual, recommend only using that for restrictive clauses and which for nonrestrictive clauses.