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Which and that

The position of which

Make sure that *which* always refers to the word or idea just before it.

This is right:

*We have introduced new investors' fact sheets **which** provide basic information about how to get started.*

This is wrong:

*We have introduced fact sheets for new investors **which** provide basic information about how to get started.*

because it is the fact sheets not the investors that are providing the information.

Which or that?

Before the grammar checker got involved, no-one had a problem with these words as far as I know. There is often a choice between *that* and *which* and the grammar checker has no idea about the difference. So it mindlessly suggests whichever one you didn't use. Now it is one of the commonest questions people ask me in writing courses. You have a choice. You can go with what sounds best to you and ignore the grammar checker's nonsense (probably fine) or you can read this section.

There are two kinds of phrase that can be introduced by *which*: modifying and restrictive.

1. Modifying

Sometimes *which* introduces a modifier (a phrase that provides extra information). In this case it should have a comma before it. There should also be a comma at the end of the modifier – like mini-brackets (see sections on commas and sentence parts in practice/mini-brackets).

*Cars, **which** are man-made, cannot find their own way home. Cats, on the other hand, are incredibly good at it.*

The *which* phrase (which are man-made) provides extra information about all cars. Put a comma at both ends

*The books on the top shelf, **which** I have read, have been collected over a number of years.*

Same applies. Put commas round *which I have read*.

- ◆ If you can put a mini-bracket round the *which* phrase, it needs two commas, one at each end.
- ◆ In modifying phrases you cannot replace *which* with *that*.

2. Restrictive

On the other hand, *which* can introduce a phrase that is restrictive. This means that it restricts the comments in the rest of the sentence to a sub-group of the books or cars in question.

*The books **which** I have read have a blue label on the front cover.*

Meaning: only those books that I have read are labelled.

*Cars **which** were manufactured before 1999 do not have airbags.*

Meaning: only old cars lack airbags.

- ◆ In restrictive phrases, you don't need any commas and you can use *that* instead of *which*.
- ◆ *Which* cannot refer to people – you use who and whom (see section on nouns/subject and object) instead.

Sample Quiz questions

1. Which and that

Could you replace “which” with “that” in this sentence?

Undergraduates benefit from attending conferences which cover a wide range of career options and allow them to meet employers.

Yes

No

2. Apostrophes

Do you need one or two apostrophes in this sentence or none at all? If there are any, where do they go?

The undergraduates experience of the conference was mainly positive, although several criticised its lack of catering facilities.

Tick one or two of the following options if you think they apply.

undergraduates’

it’s

facilities’

undergraduate’s

its’

facilitie’s

3. Commas

Does this sentence need any commas?

Most of the undergraduates at the conference which was the first they had attended felt it had been valuable and a good use of time.

If you choose yes, say where.

Yes – after this word/these words

No

Sample confusable words

L

lead	either heavy metal or the present tense of the verb to lead (pronounced to rhyme with feed)	led	past tense of the verb to lead - as in supply-led or consumer-led
license	verb: you are licensed to trade	licence	noun: you have a licence to serve alcohol
loose	not tight – rhymes with goose	lose	the opposite of win – rhymes with confuse

Quiz answers

1. Which and that

Could you replace “which” with “that” in this sentence?

Yes. “which cover a wide range of career options...” is a restrictive phrase.

2. Apostrophes

Do you need one or two apostrophes in this sentence or none at all? If there are any, where do they go?

Only one: **undergraduates’**

undergraduate’s would suggest that we were only talking about one undergraduate

it’s means “it is” *its’* doesn’t exist

facilities’ and *facilitie’s* are both there to confuse you.

3. Commas

Does this sentence need any commas?

Yes – after this word/these words:

conference and attended

In other words a mini-bracket around this phrase: “which was the first they had attended”.