

Pronouns: Who, Which, and That

Pronouns replace nouns or other pronouns (called *referents*) that have been previously stated in the same sentence or paragraph. The relationship between pronouns and their referent must be clear. Relative pronouns (like *who*, *which*, and *that*) introduce relative clauses, i.e. groups of words including a subject and a verb that define or describe the referent. The choice of pronoun varies according to the referent and to the type of clause.

Non-restrictive relative clauses offer additional information that is not essential for comprehension. They are often surrounded by commas and can easily be removed from the sentence without changing its meaning. Restrictive relative clauses provide information that is essential for comprehension. They cannot be removed from the sentence without changing its meaning, but the pronoun can sometimes be omitted without consequence.

Who

"Who" is used to replace persons.

Margaret, **who** likes tea, never leaves the house without a hot cup of Earl Grey.
After the concert, I spoke to **the woman who** taught me how to play the piano.

"Who" can begin both non-restrictive and restrictive relative clauses.

People **who** enjoy cinema often like to watch all the Oscar-nominated movies.
Samuel, **who** enjoys cinema, likes to watch all the Oscar-nominated movies.

Which

"Which" is used to replace things.

This biology class, **which** I took last fall, was very interesting.
My hat, **which** I love, is the same colour as yours.

"Which" usually begins a non-restrictive relative clause, i.e. non-essential information.

My sister stole **the pencil which** I always use during exams. (Uncommon)
My sister stole **my lucky pencil, which** I always use during exams.

That

"That" can be used to replace persons or things.

I tutored **a very bright student that** wanted to get ahead in math class.
You took **the piece of cake that** I wanted to eat.

"That" can only begin restrictive relative clauses, i.e. essential information.

I bought **this bag, that** had an ink stain, at a discount price. (Incorrect)
I bought **the bag that** had an ink stain at a discount price.

To know more, see *The Canadian Writer's Handbook, Checkmate*, the *Simon & Schuster Handbook for Writers*, or similar writing guides.