Who, which, that

Introduction



These are my boots which are good for hiking.

Definition

Who, which and that are relative pronouns.

Construction and use

We use them to introduce relative clauses.

Who is used to talk about people:
These are the people who attended the conference.

Which is used to talk about things:
They went to the conference which was in Paris.

That is used to talk about things or people:
These are the people that attended the conference.
They went to the conference that was in Paris.

Defining relative clauses

In these sentences, we need the relative clause to define the people and the conference:

These are the people who attended the conference.
They went to the conference that was in Paris.

If we only say, "These are the people" or "They went to the conference", there is some information missing - we might not know which people or which conference.

In these kinds of sentences, we do not use commas and we can use that instead of who and which. That is more common in conversation. Here are some examples:

> **The client who/that comes from London is visiting us next week.**
> **The files which/that are on the table are mine.**
> **These are the boots which/that are good for hiking.**

'That' or 'who/which' in defining relative clauses?

1. Who or that? Most of the time, there is no difference but:

Who is more common than that in this kind of defining sentence.	**A surgeon is someone who performs operations.** **An architect is a person who designs buildings.**
Who is more common than that in this kind of sentence - 'the man' is the subject of the verb 'went'. **That is more common in this kind of sentence - 'the man' is the object of the verb 'invited'.**	**This is the man who went to the seminar in Paris.** **This is the man that we sent to the seminar in Paris.**
That is more common in superlative and similar sentences, often seen with perfect tenses.	**The first people that joined the team were the technicians.** **He's the most efficient manager (that) I've ever worked with.**

2. Which or that? Most of the time, there is no difference but:

In most sentences, that is more common.	**The computer that was broken is OK now.** **This is the book that's a bestseller in Europe.**

After quantifiers such as 'all', 'any', 'anything', 'every', 'everything', 'no', 'nothing', 'some', 'something', 'much', 'many' and 'most', that is more common.	**They did everything that was necessary.** **Some of the information that's in this file is confidential.**
That is more common in superlative and similar sentences, often seen with perfect tenses.	**This is the biggest and best meeting room that's available.** **This is the first time (that) I've worked for a foreign company.** **It was the best film (that) I'd ever seen.**
Sometimes, we have to use that in sentences that refer to days and times etc.	**The last time (that) I went to Paris, it rained all weekend.** **The last time which I went to Paris, it rained all weekend.** ✖ **[see note 1. below]** **I joined this company in the same year (that) the head office moved to London.** **I joined this company in the same year which the head office moved to London.** ✖ **[see note 2. below]**

Notes

1. **This is because 'time' is not the subject of the verb 'went' so in the following sentence, we can use either that or which because 'time' is the subject of the verb 'is'.**

   Wednesday at 11.00 is the time that/which is best for me.

2. **However, we can say: I joined this company in the same year in which the head office moved to London.**

   Here are some more examples:

   The day on which he retired was a sad one for all of us.
   Do you remember all those months in which we had to work late every night?

Examples



Oh no, this isn't the colour which/that was on the website.



I have four children. My son who/that lives in Paris is a lawyer.



A guitarist is someone who/that plays the guitar.



Do you remember the church which/that was on the corner?



Let's go to this town which/that's on the coast.



The first thing that needs our attention is the problem with the old computers.

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