

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:

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| 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 <u>subject</u> of the verb 'went'. | This is the man who went to the seminar in Paris. |
| That is more common in this kind of sentence - 'the man' is the <u>object</u> of the verb 'invited'. | This is the man that we invited 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:

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| 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. |
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| 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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