That, Which, or Where?

The words "that," "which," and "where" are often used interchangeably, but this can lead to grammatical mistakes and/or limit the clarity of one's writing.

To decide when to use "that" or when to use "which," one must determine if the information that will follow it is **restrictive** or **nonrestrictive**.

Typically, "that" is used with **restrictive** word groups, and "which" is used with **nonrestrictive** word groups.

Restrictive word groups contain information that helps to define an independent clause and is essential to the meaning of the sentence.

Nonrestrictive word groups contain information that is nice to include but does not define or change the meaning of the sentence.

Ex: *Coffee **that is hot and freshly brewed** is the most refreshing kind.* [**restrictive**]
   *Coffee, **which can be served hot or cold**, contains caffeine.* [**nonrestrictive**]

In the second example, removing the words "which can be served hot or cold" would not change the meaning of the sentence; it would still communicate the fact that coffee contains caffeine. However, removing the words "that is hot and freshly brewed" from the first example *would* change the meaning of the sentence; in fact, it would hardly make sense if that word group was missing.

Technically, "which" can be used with either a **restrictive** or a **nonrestrictive** word group; however, using it for only **nonrestrictive** purposes can help to clarify one's intended meaning.

Ex: *Bears **that** live in the wild are beautiful creatures.*
   *Bears, **which** live in the wild, are beautiful creatures.*

The first sentence is more specific, as it communicates that only bears that live in the wild are beautiful creatures, but the second sentence is more general, as it communicates that bears are beautiful creatures that live in the wild.

In addition, the word "that" should never be used to refer to *people.* "Who" should be used instead.

Ex: *The girl **who** waited at the bus stop in the rain got a cold.*

Where?

"Where" denotes location and should never be used instead of "that" or "which"

Incorrect: *Has anyone seen the movie **where** the astronaut gets stranded in space?*
Correct: *Has anyone seen the movie **in which** the astronaut gets stranded in space?*