That or Which?

How does one decide whether to use that or which; when should a comma be used in conjunction with these words?

First, one must decide if the information within the sentence is restrictive or nonrestrictive. What do those terms mean? “Restrictive” means the information helps to define and is essential. “Nonrestrictive” means the information is nice to include, but it does not define or change the meaning of the sentence.

Restrictive: Coffee is an essential beverage that keeps sleepy students awake.

Nonrestrictive: Coffee, hot or cold, contains caffeine. In this example, removing the words “hot or cold” does not change the meaning of the sentence; hence, commas set off the phrase “hot or cold.”

One might also write the sentence using which: Coffee, which can be served hot or cold, contains caffeine.

The simple answer is that “that” always introduces a subordinating conjunction, a restrictive word group. “Which” works for either a restrictive or nonrestrictive word group; however, using it only for nonrestrictive purposes helps to clarify meaning.

Examples: The citations that had reputable authors were the ones he used to support his research. His last paper, which was well researched, earned his tutor’s respect.

Here’s a final note on the use of “that.” “That” should never be used to refer to people. Instead, use “who.” Example: The girl who waited at the bus stop got wet.

Where?

Where denotes location. Do not use where in place of that or which. Example: Where should we meet for lunch? Or: The book is still where you left it. Or: The bus stop is the only place where the bus driver will allow people to board.