Using *Which*, *That*, and *Who*

Which, *that*, and *who* are all relative pronouns. Always use **who** when referring to <u>persons</u>, and use **that** and **which** when referring to <u>things</u>, such as objects, animals, and places. Here are three examples:

1. The tall man **who** works at the café often comes here to read.
   Who refers to a person.
2. Do you see the bird **that** lives in the holly bush?
   That refers to the bird, which is not human.
3. My copy of the Koran, **which** was sitting on the coffee table, has disappeared.
   The writer uses **which** to refer to an inanimate object.

These are not difficult distinctions; however, deciding whether to use **that** or **which** can be tricky. Follow these guidelines:

- A clause following **that** contains information that is vital, or "restrictive," to the meaning of the sentence. Also, **that** describes a specific object.
- A clause following **which** contains nonessential, or "non-restrictive," information. The meaning of the sentence would remain intact if the information is removed.
- Also, **which** is always preceded by a comma, whereas **that** requires no additional punctuation.

Let's return to examples 2 and 3:

   2. Do you see the bird that lives in the holly bush?

The bird is not just any bird; the sentence refers to a specific bird that lives in the holly bush. This information is essential, so use **that** in order to be precise.

   3. My copy of the Koran, which was sitting on the coffee table, has disappeared.

In this sentence, the most important fact is that the book has disappeared. It may be useful to know that it was on the table, but since that information is still nonessential, use **which**.

For more information on relative clauses, see: writingcenter.unc.edu/relative-clauses/