

2.3.2 The “which” Vs “that” puzzle

As depicted in Figure 15 below, there are three fundamental distinctions between the usage of *which* and *that* (when these are used as *relative pronouns*):

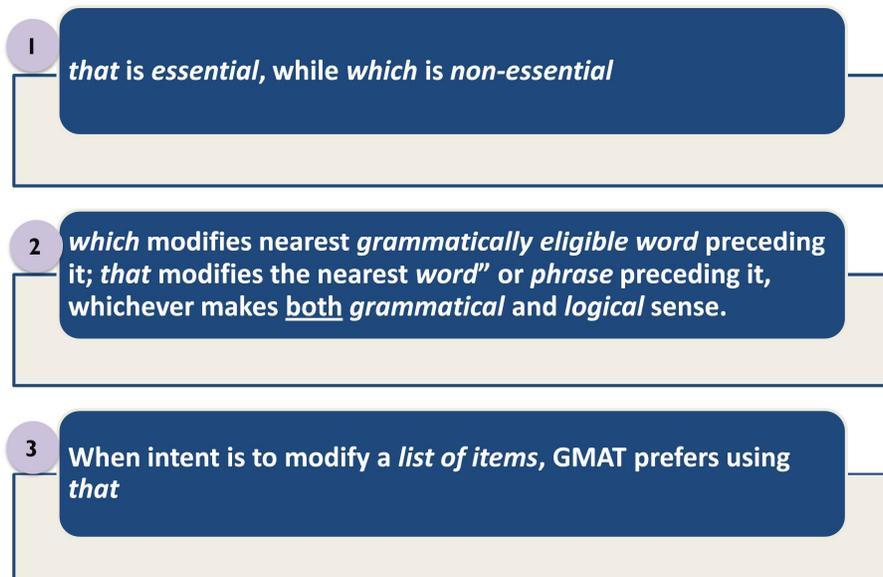


Figure 15: "which" Vs "that"

Let us discuss each of the above distinctions in detail.

Distinction 1: *that* is essential, while *which* is non-essential: Figure 16 below depicts the difference between Essential and Non-essential clauses.

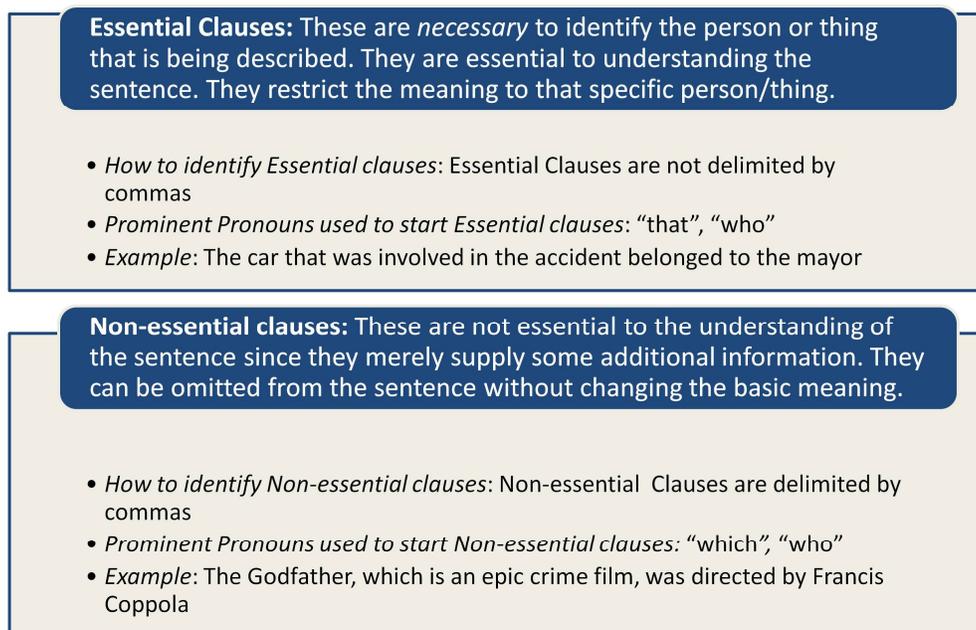


Figure 16: "Essentials" Vs "Non-Essentials"

As depicted in Figure 16 above, *essential* clauses:

- i. Help identify the person/thing that the sentence refers to. In the example:

The car that was involved in the accident belonged to the mayor.

The clause *that was involved in the accident* is helping us *identify* the mayor's car. In other words, this is *essential* to the meaning of the sentence and the whole sentence would be meaningless, if this clause were removed.

- ii. Are *not* delimited by commas: As evident in the above example (*The car that was involved in the accident belonged to the mayor*), the essential clause *that was involved in the accident* is not delimited by commas.

On the other hand, *non-essential* clauses:

- i. Are *not* essential to the meaning of the sentence and merely provide some *additional* information. In the example:

"The Godfather", which is an epic crime film, was directed by Francis Coppola.

The clause *which is an epic crime film* is merely providing some *additional* information about the film "*The Godfather*". Even without this clause, the sentence would make complete sense:

"The Godfather" was directed by Francis Coppola.

- ii. Are delimited by *commas*: As evident in the above example ("*The Godfather*", *which is an epic crime film, was directed by Francis Coppola*), the non-essential clause *which is an epic crime film* is delimited by commas.

Note:

- i. Since *that* is essential, relative clauses starting with *that* are *never* delimited by commas; on the other hand, since *which* is non-essential, relative clauses starting with *which* are *always* delimited by commas
- ii. Some pronouns such as *who* can be used both as *essential* and *non-essential*. *Presence* or *absence* of comma (before *who*) would determine whether *who* is used as *essential* or as *non-essential*.

Let us take an example, which will make clear, the distinction between *essential clauses* and *non-essential clauses*. The following picture illustrates a *parking area* which currently has 9 cars parked (each car uniquely identified from 1 through 9).



If the statement uses *non-essential* clause:
The third car, which is blue, belongs to James.

The implication is:
 Car # 3 belongs to James.

Reason: *which is blue* is *non-essential* clause. So, the *core* of the above sentence is:
The third car belongs to James. An additional piece of information that we are provided about this car is that this car is blue in color.

However, if the statement uses *essential* clause:
The third car that is blue belongs to James.

The implication is:
 Car # 6 belongs to James.

Reason: *that is blue* is *essential* clause. So, this clause helps us *identify* the car that belongs to James. Car #1 is the *first* car that is blue; car #3 is the *second* car that is blue; car #6 is the *third* car that is blue!

Distinction 2: Figure 17 below depicts the second distinction between the usage of *which* and *that*. This distinction is *more significant* from GMAT perspective.

Which	That
<p><i>Which</i> always modifies the <u>nearest grammatically eligible</u> word preceding it. So, <i>which</i> modifies the nearest word which makes:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Grammatical sense 	<p><i>That</i> is more <i>flexible</i>. It can modify either the <i>word</i> preceding it or the <i>phrase</i> preceding it, whichever makes <u>both</u>:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Grammatical sense 2. Logical Sense
Grammatical sense	
<p>Few factors that determine <u>grammatical sense</u> are:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Usage restrictions of Pronouns (<i>which/that</i> can <u>only</u> modify <i>non-persons</i>: <i>which/that</i> can modify <i>things/places/animals/plants</i>, but <i>cannot</i> modify <i>people</i>) 2. Singular/Plural usage 	
Bottom-line	
<p>Both <i>which</i> and <i>that</i> would have a tendency modify the <u>nearest word</u>, unless there is a strong reason why the nearest word is not an appropriate candidate to modify (<i>Grammatical sense</i> in case of <i>which</i> and <i>Grammatical & Logical sense</i> in case of <i>that</i>) .</p>	

Figure 17: What *which* and *that* modify

As stated in Figure 17 above, *that* is more *flexible* in what it can modify. Figure 18 below further explains how we can decide what *which* and *that* modify:

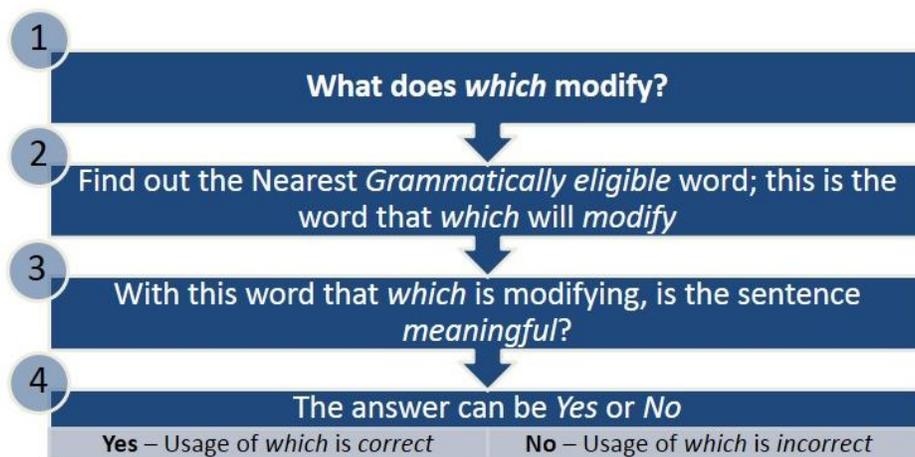


Figure 18: What does "which" modify

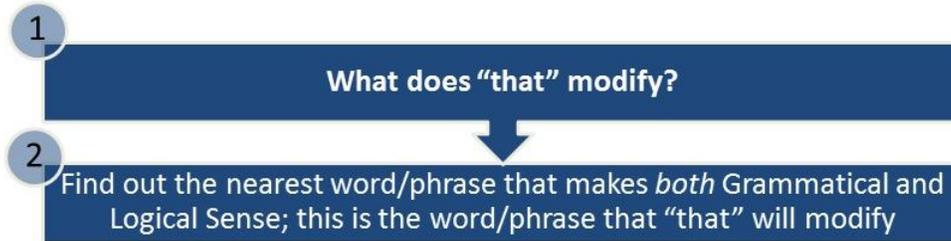


Figure 19: What does "that" modify

Let us take few examples to discuss this distinction further:

The life of the author, which was full of hardships, was an inspiration for many.

Let us analyze the above sentence, by applying the framework depicted in *Figure 18*:

1. What does *which* modify in this sentence?
2. Find the nearest *grammatically eligible* word: While *author* is the word *nearest* to "which", *author* is not *grammatically eligible* to be modified by *which*. This is because *which* cannot *grammatically* modify *people*. (*Usage restriction of Pronouns: which* cannot modify *people/persons*). Hence, the *nearest grammatically eligible* word that *which* can modify in this sentence is *life*. So, *which* will modify *life*.
3. Now that we know that *which* is modifying *life*, is the sentence *meaningful*? In other words, is it meaningful for *which* to modify *life*?
4. The answer can be *yes* or *no*: In this case, the answer is *yes*, because from the context of the sentence, it was indeed the *life* (and not *author*) that was full of hardships. Since our answer is *yes*, the usage of *which* in this sentence is correct.

Let us take another sentence:

The Independence-war of America, which was fought between 1775 and 1783, resulted in "American Enlightenment".

Let us analyze the above sentence, by applying the framework depicted in *Figure 18*:

1. What does *which* modify in this sentence?
2. Find the nearest *grammatically eligible* word: The word nearest to *which* is *America*, and this is also *grammatically eligible* to be modified by *which* (because *which* can *grammatically* indeed modify a *country*). Hence, the *nearest grammatically eligible* word that *which* can modify in this sentence is *America*. So, *which* will modify *America*.
3. Now that we know that *which* is modifying *America*, is the sentence *meaningful*? In other words, is it meaningful for *which* to modify *America*?

4. The answer can be *yes* or *no*: In this case, the answer is *no*, because from the context of the sentence, it is *not meaningful* to say that *America* was fought between 1775 and 1783. Since our answer is *no*, the usage of *which* in this sentence is *incorrect*.

So, how do we fix this sentence? Well, let us re-phrase the sentence as:

America's Independence-war, which was fought between 1775 and 1783, resulted in "American Enlightenment".

Let us analyze the above sentence, by applying the framework depicted in *Figure 18*:

1. What does *which* modify in this sentence?
2. Find the nearest *grammatically eligible* word: The word nearest to *which* is *Independence-war*, and this is also *grammatically eligible* to be modified by *which* (because *which* can *grammatically* indeed modify *war*). Hence, the *nearest grammatically eligible* word that *which* can modify in this sentence is *America*. So, *which* will modify *Independence-war*.
3. Now that we know that *which* is modifying *Independence-war*, is the sentence *meaningful*? In other words, is it meaningful for *which* to modify *Independence-war*?
4. The answer can be *yes* or *no*: In this case, the answer is *yes*, because from the context of the sentence, it is *meaningful* to say that *Independence-war* was fought between 1775 and 1783. Since our answer is *yes*, the usage of *which* in this sentence is *correct*.

Now that basics are in place, let us delve into the specific areas that GMAT tests on sentence correction.