

### 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*):

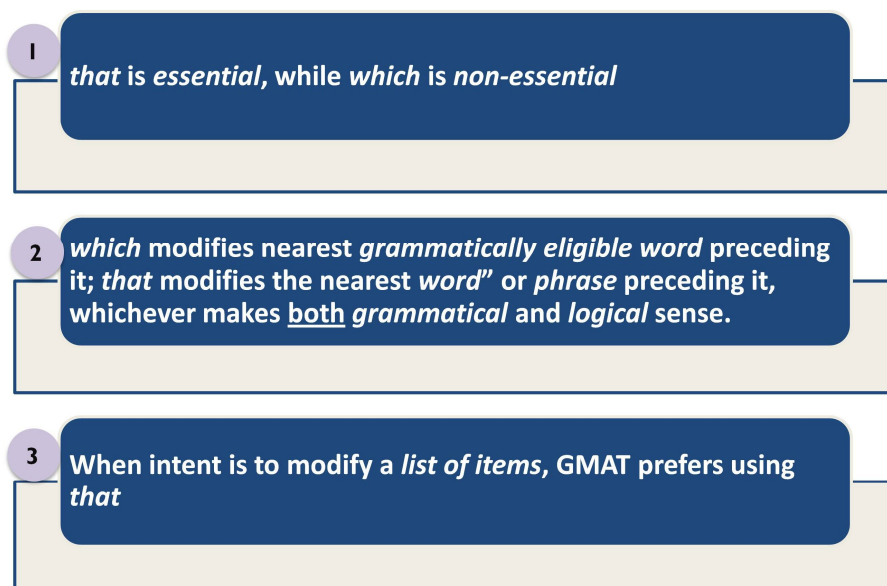


Figure 15: "which" Vs "that"

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.

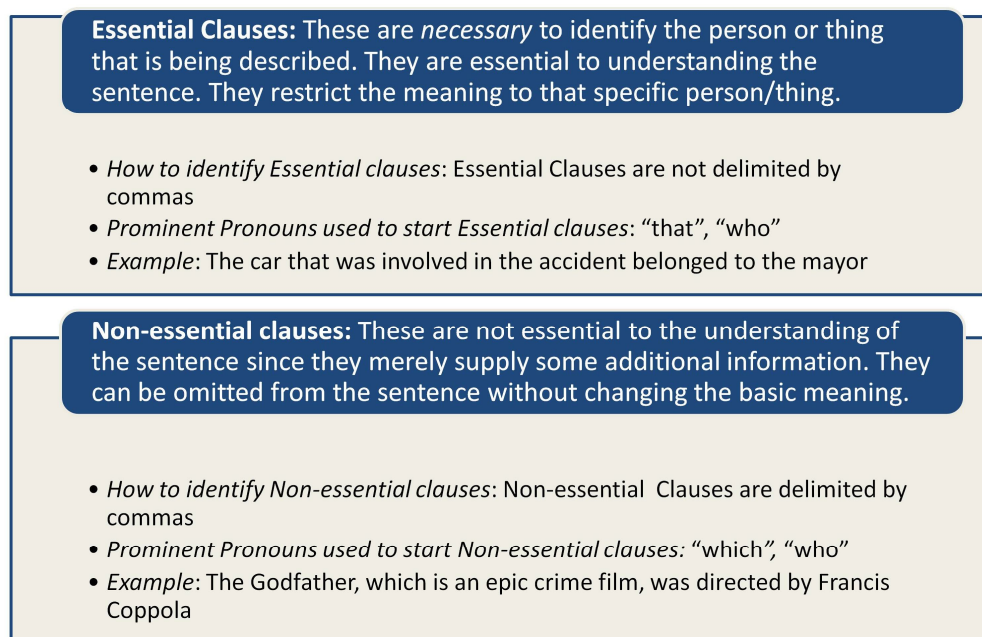


Figure 16: "Essentials" Vs "Non-Essentials"

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.

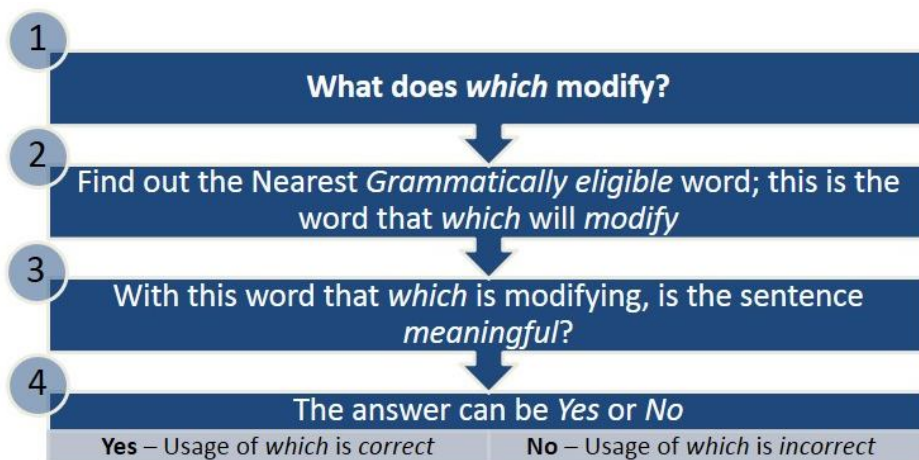
Reason: *that is blue* is *essential* clause. So, this clause helps us *identify* the car that belongs to James. Car #1 is the *first* car that is blue; car #3 is the *second* car that is blue; car #6 is the *third* car that is blue!

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

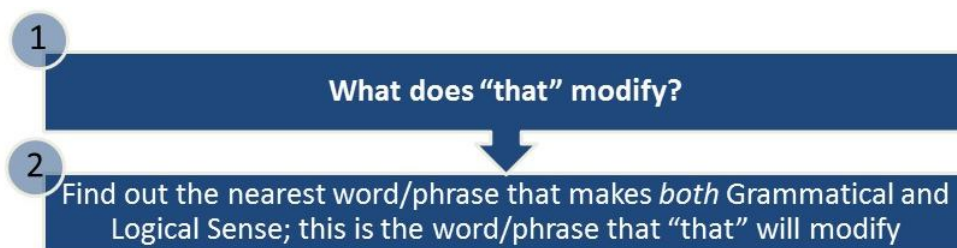
Which	That
<p><i>Which</i> always modifies the <u>nearest grammatically eligible</u> word preceding it. So, <i>which</i> modifies the nearest word which makes:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Grammatical sense</li> </ol>	<p><i>That</i> is more <i>flexible</i>. It can modify either the <i>word</i> preceding it or the <i>phrase</i> preceding it, whichever makes <u>both</u>:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Grammatical sense</li> <li>2. Logical Sense</li> </ol>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Grammatical sense</b></p> <p>Few factors that determine <u>grammatical sense</u> are:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>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>)</li> <li>2. Singular/Plural usage</li> </ol>	
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Bottom-line</b></p> <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 &amp; 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.