Who vs. That vs. Which

Before you can understand when to use **who**, **that**, and **which**, you must understand the difference between restrictive and non-restrictive clauses.

**Restrictive/Essential clause** - a relative clause in a sentence that is absolutely necessary for reader understanding.

The boy **who** wore the blue shirt hit the little girl.
- Without the restrictive clause “who wore the blue shirt,” readers would have no idea which boy hit the girl.

The worker **that** has a skull tattoo worked overtime.
- If you were to remove the restrictive clause, the sentence would not be specific. Which worker worked overtime?

**Non-Restrictive/Non-Essential clause** - a relative clause in a sentence that provides extra information, but is not necessary to uncovering the meaning of the sentence.

Pink Floyd, **which** sold 5 million records in 1971, is one of the greatest bands of all time.
- Because Pink Floyd is already a specific noun, adding the non-restrictive clause “which sold 5 million records in 1971” is just extra information. If we were to remove it, it would not detract meaning from the sentence.

Mr. Kim, **who** is the principal of Jefferson Elementary, cancelled school on Monday.
- Mr. Kim is a specific noun. “principal of Jefferson Elementary” is extra information that isn’t necessary for the reader to know that school was cancelled.

**Who**

“Who” introduces relative clauses that refer to people, both restrictive and non-restrictive.

*Examples:*
- The girl **who** sits next to you in class is always texting on her cell phone. (restrictive)
- Flora is the one **who** called the ambulance. (restrictive)
- The President, **who** visited Uganda yesterday, was unable to fly back for the meeting. (non-restrictive)

**That**

“That” introduces relative clauses that are always restrictive/essential and refer to groups or things. “That” can occasionally be used for relative clauses introducing people.

*Examples:*
- I do not buy products from stores **that** do not have a return policy. (restrictive)
- The school **that** my child goes to is closed for Labor Day. (restrictive)

**Which**

“Which” introduces relative clauses that are non-restrictive/non-essential and refer to groups or things.

*Examples:*
- Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown,” **which** was written in 1835, causes a lot of controversy within religious groups. (non-restrictive)
- Bloomingdales, **which** has an estimated revenue of $100 million dollars a year, can be found in almost all malls. (non-restrictive)