

Grammar Corner by Pat McNees

That darned comma! Which comma?

Unsure when to use the relative pronouns “which” or “that”? Use that before a clause that is essential to the meaning of the sentence (a restrictive, or defining, clause). Use which when the clause could be omitted without changing the sentence’s meaning (a nonrestrictive clause, which tacks on extra, parenthetical information). Commas set off the nondefining elements. The defining elements don’t take commas.



Insert or delete commas and “that,” “which,” or “who,” as appropriate, in the following examples, which may be correct or incorrect:

1. APH at-large director, Kathleen McGreevy, wanted reimbursement for a Cadillac, but the APH treasurer, Adrienne Johns, said we couldn’t afford it.
2. None of the entries, that came in late, are eligible.
3. The writers, who go wrong on commas, are the ones who don’t study a little grammar.
4. Give this to the woman, who handles registration.
5. The woman, (who/that/which) cooks for me, hates rutabaga.
6. A nonrestrictive clause, often called an appositional clause needs a comma on both sides.
7. Marty who does the accounting can sometimes forget which month it is.
8. Take the green hat, which Mary Ann loves best to her dressing room.
9. The cat, (that/which) had caught a sparrow looked satisfied.
10. I spent hours helping the personal historians who need editing.
11. Smythe’s Hams, Inc. will never be the same.

Answers:

1. APH at-large director Kathleen McGreevy wanted . . . (delete commas to define which director, as “APH director wanted” makes no sense), but the APH treasurer, Adrienne Johns, said . . . (keep commas, because the name is not essential).
2. Delete commas because “that came in late” is essential to the phrase “the entries that came in late.” “None of the entries are eligible” conveys something else.
Remember: “That” preceding a defining phrase takes no comma.
3. Delete commas; “who go wrong on commas” is a defining phrase.
4. Delete the comma because the sentence needs the defining phrase (“who handles registration”) to make sense. You *would* use a comma if it read “Give this to John, who handles registration.” In that case, “give this to John” makes sense without the additional phrase.
5. Delete commas (defining), and choose “who” (The woman who cooks for me hates . . .).
Rule of thumb: Generally, use “who” for people and “that” for things.
6. Insert a comma after “appositional clause.”
7. Insert commas around “who does the accounting,” which is not essential to the sentence’s meaning.
8. If only one green hat is involved, insert a comma after “best”; if there are two or more green hats, delete the comma and substitute “that” for “which”: “Take the green hat that Mary loves best to her dressing room.”
Remember: If you can tell what is being discussed without the clause, use “which”; if you can’t, use “that.”



WordCraft
Look Your Best in Print

Mim Eisenberg
2695 Shadow Pine Drive
Roswell, GA 30076

phone and fax: 770 645-1166
cell phone: 404 353-4410

mim@wordcraftservices.com
www.wordcraftservices.com

Transcription of Personal History Interviews
Editing & Proofreading

Outstanding Services for the Personal Historian

9. If there are two or more cats and only one cat caught a sparrow, use “that” and no commas (“The cat that had caught a sparrow . . .”). If only one cat is involved, surround “which had caught a sparrow” with commas. (Mind you, British usage is more lax on using “which” for “that.”)
10. Whether you insert a comma after “historians” depends on whether only some of the personal historians needed editing (in which case, no comma because “the personal historians who needed editing” is defining), or whether they all did (in which case, use a comma).
11. “Smythe’s Hams Inc. will never” or “Smythe’s Hams, Inc., will never. . . .” Commas are not required around “Inc.” as part of a company’s name, but if they are used, they must appear both before and after the element. Ditto “Ltd.”

Remember: Treat the nonrestrictive element, the one that is not essential to the meaning of the sentence, the same way on both sides.

Michael Quinion, on World Wide Words (www.worldwidewords.org/articles/which.htm), has an explanation that clarifies the British position on “which.” He rightly believes the commas are more important than the word choice.

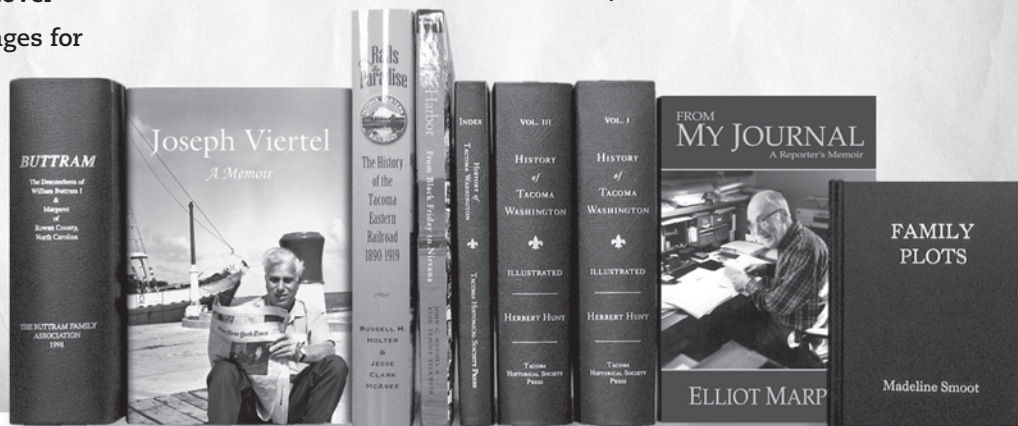
Pat McNees (www.patmcnees.com) was a book editor (Harper & Row and Fawcett) before becoming an independent journalist, writer, and editor (www.writersandeditors.com). You’ll find more links to helpful explanations of style and grammar here: www.writersandeditors.com/style__grammar__diction_57354.htm.



- quantities 25 to 3,000
- competitive prices
- softcover and hardcover
- full color interior pages for 25 to 500 books
- custom text and cover design
- hardcover with ribbon markers, slipcuses, and printed endsheets
- sewn hardcover bindings

The book printer chosen by more

Personal Historians



Call today to discuss your project and request a copy of our free 64-page guidebook!

www.gorhamprinting.com • 3718 Mahoney Drive, Centralia, WA 98531 • 1-800-837-0970