**That and Which**

**Restrictive/Essential clauses** (“that”) modify, focus and limit. Because the information they supply is essential to the intended meaning of the sentence, they are not set off by commas.

**Non-restrictive/Non-essential clauses** (“which”) do not limit the words they modify. They simply add information that otherwise would not be provided. Non-restrictive clauses are set off by commas because the information they provide is supplementary, not essential to the meaning of the sentence.

*Examples:*

The lawnmower **that** is in the garage needs sharpening.

(We have more than one lawnmower. Only the one in the garage needs sharpening).

The lawnmower, **which** is in the garage, needs sharpening.

(We have only one lawnmower. It's in the garage and needs sharpening).

The statue **that** stands in the hall is on loan from the museum.

(A number of statues are in the building. Only the one in the hall is on loan from the

museum).

The statue, **which** stands in the hall, is on loan from the museum.

(Only one statue is under discussion. It is on loan from the museum and happens to be in the hall).

Who

Restrictive and non-restrictive clauses need not begin with “that” and “which.” For example, if humans or animals with names are being discussed, “who” may become the appropriate choice for both kinds of clauses. In such cases, a comma all by itself can transform the meaning of the sentence.

*Examples:*

He helped the native guides **who** were sick with malaria.

(No comma appears before “who.” Therefore, what follows is a restrictive clause. Not all

the guides had malaria).

He helped the native guides**,** **who** were sick with malaria.

(Putting the comma before “who” makes what follows a non-restrictive clause. It also changes

the sentence to mean that **all the guides** had malaria).