That Versus Which

The use of that:

* Use ‘that’ with restrictive clauses—A restrictive clause is one that limits or restricts the identity of the subject in some way. There is no comma use when using ‘that’. (However, if the subject is or was a human being, use ‘who’ to introduce the clause).

Correct Restrictive Use:

**The painting that was hanging in the foyer was stolen.**

**Explanation: The use of ‘that’ in this sentence is correct if the reader intends to single out the one painting that was in the foyer as the stolen painting. The restriction here tells us that the one painting that had been hanging in the foyer—not the painting in the living room, or the one in the drawing room, or any of those in the parlor, was stolen.**

The use of which:

* Use ‘which’ with nonrestrictive clauses. A nonrestrictive clause may tell us something interesting or incidental about a subject, but it does not define that subject. When writing a nonrestrictive clause, introduce it with ‘which’ and insert commas around the clause. (However, if the subject is or was a human being, use ‘who’ to introduce the clause).

Correct Nonrestrictive Use:

**The painting, which was hanging in foyer, was stolen.**

**Explanation: While this nonrestrictive use tells us that the painting was hanging in the foyer, it does not tell us which of the several paintings in the foyer as the stolen painting. It would be incorrect to use this nonrestrictive clause if there had been only one painting in the foyer, as the sentence leaves open the possibility that there were others.**

* Correct Use of Both Restrictive and Nonrestrictive Clauses:

**The Van Gogh that was hanging in the foyer, which we purchased in 1929 for $10,000 was stolen.**

**Explanation: The restrictive clause beginning with ‘that’ tells us that there was only one Van Gogh hanging in the foyer and that it was stolen. The nonrestrictive clause beginning with ‘which’ tells us that the owner had paid for the painting, but does not tell us that the owner did not pay another $10,000 for another painting in the same year. It does not limit the possibilities to the Van Gogh that was in the foyer.**