To That or Not to That: When to Use and When to Omit "That"

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To That or Not to That: When to Use and When to Omit That

Tenielle Fordyce-Ruff

I know that I’ve written several columns dedicated to creating conciseness or using fewer words in legal writing. There are times, however, when writers are tempted to remove a word when they really shouldn’t. Enter the word *that*.

Using or omitting *that* can be confusing. Sometimes a sentence needs a *that*, sometimes a sentence doesn’t need a *that*, and sometimes using *that* is optional. This month, I’ll address some tips to help you understand when *that* is necessary, when it is optional, and when you might want to use *that* even if it is optional.

**What is that?**

Part of the confusion caused by *that* is because it has so many grammatical functions. *That* can be a conjunction, an adjective, or an adverb; it can also function as a pronoun.

*That* as a subordinating conjunction: *The judge said that she would rule shortly.*

*That* as an adjective: *He’s argued in front of that court.*

*That* as an adverb: *The brief was not that good.*

As a pronoun, it can be the word that directly replaces the noun:

*That’s my grammar guide.*

Or it can be the pronoun that introduces a relative clause:

*The style guide that I just bought is missing.* (pronoun introducing relative clause)

The sentences either don’t make sense, or the meaning has changed without the *that*. But other sentences do make sense without *that*.

*The judge said that she would rule shortly.* (subordinating conjunction)

So you can omit *that* when it’s functioning as a subordinating conjunction. But how do you know when you might want to use *that* or keep it? Here are a few tips to guide your choice.

**That and verbs**

Writers can omit *that* with bridge verbs. Linguists define bridge verbs as verbs of common speech or thought: “say,” “think,” “know,” “claim,” “hear,” or “believe.” For these simple verbs, it’s fine to omit the *that*.

*I hear that there are excellent grammar blogs.*

*I believe that we can all improve our writing.*

Bridge verbs are simple in meaning and they carry no extra meaning beyond simply speaking or thinking. Because of this, the reader will understand the meaning without the *that*.

*Non-bridge verbs, however, convey a more nuanced, less simple meaning. Because of this, it’s best to use the *that*.*

*I whispered that there was a better word choice.*

*He confirmed that there were necessary uses of certain words.*

Neither of these sentences sound as good without *that*. There are
times, though, when omitting *that* after a non-bridge verb can create a miscue.

*Jane maintains a huge collection of grammar guides is too much.*

This sentence leads the reader to believe that Jane has many grammar books at the beginning, but ends up with a different meaning—and one that causes the reader to have to go back and mentally insert the *that*. To avoid this type of miscue sentence, use *that*.

*Jane maintains that a huge collection of grammar guides is too much.*

**That and nouns**

Like with verbs, some nouns don’t need a *that* to follow them; others would sound awkward without the *that*.

*There’s the possibility that I’ll write about writing.*

*I have a feeling that some readers will email me about my column.*

*The fact that she taught writing was well known.*

Also, as with verbs, sometimes omitting a *that* after a noun will create confusion. *When that* is part of an adjectival clause (a group of words with a subject and a verb that describe something), the *that* is necessary because it is the subject of the clause.

*The dog that performs the most tricks will win a prize.*

In other cases, *that* can introduce an adjectival clause or it can introduce a clause that just explains what the noun is. In cases where *that* introduces an explanatory clause, use the *that*.

*The rumor that I stopped writing this column was unfounded.*

*The rumor that she started was vicious.*

*The rumor that she started dying her hair pink was true.*

In the last example, omitting *that* could create a miscue, leading the reader to believe she had started a rumor, not that there was a rumor to the effect of her hair color.

**That and adjectives**

Once again, the advice is to go with what sounds best when *that* follows an adjective. Just remember that the more common adjectives are likely to tolerate omitting *that* better than less-common ones.

*She was glad that you followed these tips.*

*She was devastated that her students sometimes struggled with grammar.*

**Conclusion**

So with all the tips about when it’s okay to omit a *that* how does a writer exercise his judgment? First, don’t use too many *that’s* in one sentence. If a sentence already has a necessary *that*, consider omitting the unnecessary ones.

*Some people think that adding that improves the flow of a sentence.*

Second, read your writing out loud and listen for flow. Keep in the *that’s* that help with flow and remove those that don’t. And finally, if in doubt, use the *that*. It usage will guarantee clarity, but it’s omission might not.

**Sources**


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