

2-2018

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Tenielle Fordyce-Ruff, To That or Not to That: When to Use and When to Omit That, 61 Advocate 44, 45 (2018).

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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.

For most of these examples as written, the *that* is necessary. Try reading these sentences without *that*. *He's argued in front of that court.* (adjective)

The brief was not that good. (adverb)

That's my grammar guide. (direct pronoun)

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.

That can be a conjunction, an adjective, or an adverb; it can also function as a pronoun.

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 other cases *that* can introduce an adjectival clause or it can introduce a clause that just explains what the noun is.



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*. Its usage will guarantee clarity, but its omission might not.

Sources

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