Notes on “Essential and Nonessential Clauses,”
Which Have Been Worded by Helen Schweitz

*That* and *which* often begin adjective clauses; that is, clauses that describe nouns. The two types of adjective clauses are essential clauses and nonessential clauses.

With an Essential Clause… (also called *Restrictive* or *Defining*)

- the sentence would make no sense without it
- no comma is needed to separate the clause

BAD: Your mom is working on the presentation, that could warrant her a promotion.
OK: Your mom is working on the presentation that could warrant her a promotion.
OK: Your mom is working on a presentation, which could warrant her a promotion.

With a Nonessential Clause… (also called *Nonrestrictive* or *Nondefining*)

- the sentence makes sense without it
- a comma is needed before the clause and after the clause as well if the clause doesn’t end the sentence

BAD: Your mom said a film which was titled “Who Killed The Electric Car?” made her cry.
OK: Your mom said a film, which was titled “Who Killed The Electric Car?,” made her cry.
OK: Your mom said a film that was titled “Who Killed The Electric Car?” made her cry.

More Examples Using *That* and *Which*:

Your mom prefers cars that are made by environment-loving companies.
Your mom replaced my windshield wipers, which were extremely worn down.
Your mom claimed she bakes great chocolate cookies, which I am allergic to, that she would bring to the next home game.

Let’s say you want to be more specific in describing your noun – you want to describe a person, place or thing. In this case *that* and *which* can be replaced with *who, where or when*. These three words can be used to begin both essential and nonessential clauses. The presence of a comma, or of commas, determines whether the clause is read as essential or nonessential. As with using *that* and *which*, no comma indicates an essential clause.

Examples Using *Who*:
Maria, who just ran over her dog, is in mourning.
Patients who rely on second opinions should seek out specialists who know what they’re talking about.
My amazing doctor, who has thirty years of experience, is becoming less and less amazing as her eyesight deteriorates.

Sources:
Lauren Kessler, Duncan McDonald, When Words Collide (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1992), 96-7.