USES OF “THAT” IN SENTENCES

Explanation

The relative pronoun “that” has several functions in English, but it is often omitted by beginning writers. The primary function of “that” in a sentence is to connect or link a noun clause to the rest of the sentence. It also serves as a signpost indicating the subordinate nature of the noun clause which it introduces. Therefore, students who want to improve their writing need to pay particular attention to the use of “that.”

Examples: I heard that tuition will not be raised this semester.

The coach feels that running a mile every day during the summer will keep his players in shape.

The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world.

Although, “that” can sometimes be omitted from the noun clause, failure to include the relative pronoun in sentences like above that are almost illogical. Consider the sentence: “I heard tuition will not be raised this semester.” Clearly the speaker does not mean that he or she heard tuition. Again consider the expression: “the coach feels running a mile everyday…..” here again leaving out the relative pronoun, results in a sentence that begins with a nonsensical statement. In the final example with are left with a sentence that does not sound like a true English statement: “The hand rocks the cradle rules the world.” Thus, the relative pronoun is necessary so that the clause will be correctly linked to the rest of the sentence.

Another use of “that” is often omitted by the student when they use the relative pronoun following expressions that being with “the reason why.” Students often state that the reason why is because…. generally introduces adverb clauses, and therefore cannot be used to introduce a noun clause. Another point is that students must keep in mind that whenever there is a linking verb in a sentence, the complement can only be a noun or an adjective. Therefore it is unlikely that an adverb or adverb clause would follow a linking verb.

Incorrect: The reason why I was late to class is because I had a flat tire.

Correct: The reason why I was late to class is that I had a flat tire.

Notice the linking verb “is”, which demands a noun clause and not an adverb clause.

Incorrect: the reason why your name was left off the list is because it was originally out of alphabetical order.
Correct: The reason why your name was left off the list is that it was originally out of alphabetical order.

One of the most common uses of the relative pronoun “that” is in direct quotations. Many times students are not aware that the word “that” is primary to recognizing and writing indirect quotations and, therefore, omit it. However, most declarative, imperative, and exclamatory statements that are quoted indirectly must have the relative pronoun.

Incorrect: he said he waited an hour for the bus.
Correct: He said “I waited an hour for the bus.”
Indirect: He said that he had waited an hour for the bus.
Incorrect: She replied I can’t come right now.
Correct: She replied “I can’t come right now.”
Indirect: She replied that she couldn’t go right then.

Note: indirect quotes do not use the exact words of the speaker but must convey the exact thought. They also are not set off with quotation marks or commas.

Point to remember about “that”
Since “that” functions primarily to introduce noun clauses, no comma is used in front of it, nor after it.

That may be used to refer to both people and things. However, the relative pronoun “who” is preferable in most instances when referring to people.

EXERCISE

Rewrite the following sentences correctly to demonstrate your comprehension of the correct use of the relative pronoun.

1. John says we should leave before the snow starts.
2. I feel I should level with you about our relationship.
3. Tom said you are crazy to risk your life for a dog.
4. The day I graduated from high school was the happiest day of my life.
5. I believe all people are created equal.
6. Lets meet inside the library by the wishing well on the first floor, Janise suggested.
7. Everything went so fast I felt frightened.
8. The jury said that we can’t reach a consensus.
9. Blow the horn, and I will come out my buddy said.
10. I find it hard to believe that this year is almost gone.
Answers:

1. John said that we should leave before the snow started (starts). or
   John said, “let’s leave before the snow starts.”
2. I feel that I should level with you about our relationship.
3. Tom said I was crazy to risk my life for a dog. Or
   Tom said “you are crazy to risk your life for dog.”
4. The day that I graduated from high school was the happiest day of my life.
5. I believe that all people are created equal.
6. Janise suggested that we inside the library by the wishing well on the first floor.
   Or
   Janise suggested, “lets meet inside the library by the wishing well on the first floor.”
7. Everything went so fast that I felt frightened.
8. The jury said that they could not reach a consensus. Or
   The jury said, “we cannot reach a consensus.”
9. My buddy told me that I should blow my horn and that he would come out. Or
   My buddy told me, “blow your horn and ill come out.”
10. I find it hard to believe that this year is almost gone.