THAT vs WHAT

THAT | WHAT

1. relative pronoun

THAT

Usage

✓ to refer to people, animals or things in a defining relative clause*

*These clauses provide essential information about the noun they describe, and the sentence would lose its meaning if this information were removed.

Structure

Subject + Verb + That + Clause
This is the book that I was talking about.
She is the woman that helped me yesterday.
The car that broke down is still in the garage.

"That" introduces important information about the book, woman and car, and removing the clause would leave the sentence incomplete.

WHAT

Usage

✓ to refer to things or concepts, to introduce nominal relative clauses, which act as the subject or object of the sentence. Unlike "that," "what" replaces both the subject and the object of the clause.

Structure

Subject + Verb + What + Clause
She gave me what I needed.
What he said made me laugh.
I don't know what you want from me.

"What" refers to a specific unknown thing or idea, and it cannot be replaced by "that".

2. reference

THAT

Usage

✓ to refer to something specific that is already mentioned

I didn't understand that he wanted help. ⇨ refers to a specific fact

WHAT

Usage

✓ to refer to an unknown thing or something yet to be defined

I didn't understand what he wanted. ⇨ refers to an unknown object or idea

3. conjunction and reported speech

Usage

✓ to connect a statement with a subordinate clause, give reasons and explanations
✓ to report statements or thoughts

Structure

Main Clause + That + Subordinate Clause
I hope that you understand what I mean.
It's clear that they were late.
Reporting Verb + That + Clause
She told me that she was leaving soon.
He believes that he'll win the race.

4. interrogative pronoun

Usage

✓ to ask for specific/unknown information about things, concepts or actions

Structure

What + Verb/Subject + Object/Complement
What are you doing?
What do you want for dinner?
Can you tell me what she said?

5. demonstrative pronoun

6. exclamatory pronoun

✓ to point to something specific in a situation, something distant or previously mentioned

Structure

Subject + Verb + That + Noun/Clause
That is the house we're going to buy.
That was a fantastic dinner!
That makes sense now.

✓ to express emotion, surprise or strong emotions about something

Structure

What + Noun Phrase/Adjective Phrase
What a beautiful view!
What a fantastic idea!
What nonsense!

"What" emphasizes the noun or the adjective that follows.

7. defining and non-defining clauses

Usage

✓ in defining relative clauses to provide essential information (cannot be used in non-defining relative clauses, which provide extra, non-essential information)

Defining: *This is the book that changed my life.*
⇨ essential information

Usage

✓ not in defining nor non-defining clauses

Non-defining: *This book, which changed my life, is very special.* ⇨ additional, non-essential information

8. formal language

Usage

✓ more frequently in reported speech and relative clauses

Formal: *The decision that he made was final.*
Informal: *The decision he made was final.*

"That" can be omitted, provided the sentence remains clear.
The book that you gave me is excellent. → *The book you gave me is excellent.*
I hope that you pass the exam. → *I hope you pass the exam.*

In formal writing, it's generally better to keep "that", but in conversation, people often drop it.

Usage

✓ mainly reserved for questions, exclamations and nominal relative clauses

Formal: *What he said was unacceptable.*