what versus *that* (relative pronoun)

Basic rule: Do not use ***what*** if there is a word in the sentence that ***what*** could refer to. Use ***that***.

that and ***what*** head subordinate clauses.

that: ***that*** refers to a word that is elsewhere in the sentence, usually a noun phrase or pronoun in the main clause. The main clause on its own is usually a grammatically complete sentence.

what: ***what*** does not refer to another word in the sentence, but rather to a hole (or empty slot = 0) in the main clause. ***what*** means an undefined something: *the (sort of) thing that* can replace ***what***. The main clause on its own is often not a grammatically complete sentence or is missing expected information. The subordinate clause headed by *what* is required to complete the main clause grammatically.

Words in parentheses () can be omitted and grey shading shows the main clause.

that

The yellow car is *the one* (***that***) I want.

Main clause complete	**Subordinate clause**
The yellow car is *the one*	(***that***) I want
pronoun	

what

The yellow car is ***what*** I want.

Main clause	**Subordinate clause**	
The yellow car is _____	***what***	I want
0	*the thing that*	

The one (*that*) I want is the yellow car.

Main cl.	**Subord. clause**	**Main cl. completion**
The one	(***that***) I want	is the yellow car
pronoun		

What I want is the yellow car.

Subordinate clause		**Main clause incomplete**
What	I want	_____ is the yellow car
the thing that		*0*

All (***that***) I saw was a mess.

Main clause	**Subordinate clause**	**Main cl. completion**
All	(***that***) I saw	was a mess
pronoun		

What I saw was a mess.

Subordinate clause		**Main clause incomplete**
What	I saw	_____ was a mess
The thing that		*0*

Is this *the bag* ***that*** you need?

Main clause complete	**Subord. clause**
Is this *the bag*	***that*** you need?
noun	

Is this bag ***what*** you need?

Main clause	**Subordinate clause**	
Is this bag ____	***what***	you need?
0	*the sort of thing that*	

I saw *the table* ***that*** was for sale.

Main clause complete	**Subord. clause**
I saw *the table*	(***that*** was) for sale
noun	

I saw ***what*** was for sale.

Main clause	**Subordinate clause**	
I saw ____	***what***	was for sale
0	*the sort of thing that*	

Potential confusion due to *that* and *what*

1. ***that*** can sometimes be omitted: The yellow car is *the one* I want = The yellow car is *the one* ***that*** I want
2. ***that*** does not always refer to a word elsewhere in the sentence. Here, the entire ***that*** clause means the thought: 'I will leave soon': I think (***that***) I will leave soon.
   The entire ***that*** clause is the thought that surprised me: (The fact) ***That*** she came on time surprised me.
3. *which*, not ***what***, can refer to an entire preceding clause: She came on time, *which* (fact) surprised me.
4. ***that*** is sometimes mandatory: e.g., as the subject of a subordinate clause when the verb is not *to be*:
   The cat ***that*** jumped fell over versus I saw *the table* (***that*** *was*) for sale
5. ***what*** cannot be omitted as the head of a subordinate clause.
6. *which* (for things) and *who(m)* (for people) can replace ***that***: The lunch *which* I liked… The girl *who* came…
7. ***that*** and ***what*** can function as something other than pronouns that head a subordinate clause:
   That girl is tall. That's it! I didn't know that. What a girl! What's that? I don't know what.
   I don't know what/which meeting is next.

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