

Choosing between pronouns such as *I* and *me*

The personal pronouns in the following chart change what is known as *case form* according to their grammatical function in a sentence. Pronouns functioning as subjects (or subject complements) appear in the *subjective* case; those functioning as objects appear in the *objective* case; and those showing ownership appear in the *possessive* case.

| | SUBJECTIVE CASE | OBJECTIVE CASE | POSSESSIVE CASE |
|-----------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| SINGULAR | I you he/she/it | me you him/her/it | my your his/her/its |
| PLURAL | we you they | us you them | our your their |

Use the subjective case (*I, you, he, she, it, we, they*) for subjects and subject complements.

When personal pronouns are used as subjects, ordinarily your ear will tell you the correct pronoun. Problems sometimes arise, however, with compound word groups containing a pronoun, so it is not always safe to trust your ear.

- ▶ Joel ran away from home because his stepfather and ^{he}~~him~~ had quarreled.

His stepfather and he is the subject of the verb *had quarreled*. If we strip away the words *his stepfather and*, the correct pronoun becomes clear: *he had quarreled* (not *him had quarreled*).

When a pronoun is used as a subject complement (a word following a linking verb), your ear may mislead you, since the incorrect form is frequently heard in casual speech.

- ▶ During the Lindbergh trial, Bruno Hauptmann repeatedly denied that the kidnapper was ^{he.}~~him~~.

If *kidnapper was he* seems too stilted, rewrite the sentence: *During the Lindbergh trial, Bruno Hauptmann repeatedly denied that he was the kidnapper.*

Use the objective case (*me, you, him, her, it, us, them*) for all objects.

When a personal pronoun is used as a direct object, an indirect object, or the object of a preposition, ordinarily your ear will lead you to the correct pronoun. When an object is compound, however, you may occasionally become confused.

- ▶ Janice was indignant when she realized that the salesclerk was insulting her mother and ^{her.}~~she~~.

Her mother and her is the direct object of the verb *was insulting*. Strip away the words *her mother and* to hear the correct pronoun: *was insulting her* (not *was insulting she*).

(continued)

- ▶ The most traumatic experience for her father and ^{me} ~~I~~ occurred long after her operation.

Her father and me is the object of the preposition *for*. Strip away the words *her father and* to test for the correct pronoun: *for me* (not *for I*).

When in doubt about the correct pronoun, some writers try to avoid making the choice by using a reflexive pronoun such as *myself*. Such evasions are nonstandard, even though they are used by some educated persons.

- ▶ The Indian cab driver gave my husband and ^{me} ~~myself~~ some good tips on traveling in New Delhi.
- ▶ The independent film company hired my sister and ^{me} ~~myself~~ as marketing consultants.

My husband and me is the indirect object of the verb *gave*. *My sister and me* is the direct object of the verb *hired*. For correct uses of *myself*, see the Glossary of Usage.

Put an appositive and the word to which it refers in the same case.

Appositives are noun phrases that rename nouns or pronouns. A pronoun used as an appositive has the same function (usually subject or object) as the word(s) it renames.

- ▶ The chief strategists, Dr. Bell and ^{I,} ~~me~~, could not agree on a plan.

The appositive *Dr. Bell and I* renames the subject, *strategists*. Test: *I could not agree* (not *me could not agree*).

- ▶ The reporter interviewed only two witnesses, the bicyclist and ^{me.} ~~I~~.

The appositive *the bicyclist and me* renames the direct object, *witnesses*. Test: *interviewed me* (not *interviewed I*).

Following *than* or *as*, choose the pronoun that expresses your meaning.

When a comparison begins with *than* or *as*, your choice of a pronoun will depend on your intended meaning. Consider, for example, the difference in meaning between these sentences.

- My husband likes football more than I.
- My husband likes football more than me.

Finish each sentence mentally and its meaning becomes clear: *My husband likes football more than I [do]*. *My husband likes football more than [he likes] me*.

(continued)

For *we* or *us* before a noun, choose the pronoun that would be appropriate if the noun were omitted.

▶ ^{We}
~~Us~~ tenants would rather fight than move.

▶ Management is short-changing ^{us}
~~we~~ tenants.

No one would say *Us would rather fight than move* or *Management is short-changing we*.

Use the objective case for subjects and objects of infinitives.

An infinitive is the word *to* followed by the base form of a verb. Subjects of infinitives are an exception to the rule that subjects must be in the subjective case. Whenever an infinitive has a subject, it must be in the objective case. Objects of infinitives also are in the objective case.

▶ Ms. Wilson asked John and ^{me}
~~I~~ to drive the senator and ^{her}
~~she~~ to the airport.

John and me is the subject of the infinitive *to drive*; *senator and her* is the direct object of the infinitive.

Use the possessive case to modify a gerund.

A pronoun that modifies a gerund or a gerund phrase should appear in the possessive case (*my, our, your, his, her, its, their*). A gerund is a verb form ending in *-ing* that functions as a noun. Gerunds frequently appear in phrases, in which case the whole gerund phrase functions as a noun.

▶ The chances of ^{your}
~~you~~ being hit by lightning are about two million to one.

Your modifies the gerund phrase *being hit by lightning*.

Nouns as well as pronouns may modify gerunds. To form the possessive case of a noun, use an apostrophe and an *-s* (*victim's*) or just an apostrophe (*victims'*).

▶ The old order in France paid a high price for the ^{aristocracy's}
~~aristocracy~~ exploiting the lower classes.

The possessive noun *aristocracy's* modifies the gerund phrase *exploiting the lower classes*.

NOTE: Do not use the possessive if it creates an awkward effect. Try to reword the sentence instead.

Gerund phrases should not be confused with participial phrases, which function as adjectives, not as nouns: *We saw Brenda driving a yellow convertible*. Here *driving a yellow convertible* is a participial phrase modifying the noun *Brenda*.

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Checking for problems with pronoun case

Look for the most common trouble spots; where possible, apply a test for the correct pronoun.

COMPOUND WORD GROUPS

Test: Mentally strip away the rest of the compound word group.

While diving for pearls, [Ikiko and] *she* found a treasure chest full of gold bars.

Geoffrey went with [my family and] *me* to King's Dominion.

PRONOUN AFTER IS, ARE, WAS, OR WERE

In formal English, remember to use the subjective-case pronouns *I*, *he*, *she*, *we*, and *they* after the linking verbs *is*, *are*, *was*, and *were*.

The panel was shocked to learn that the undercover agent was *she*.

APPOSITIVES

Test: Mentally strip away the word group that the appositive renames. (You may need to apply one of the other tests as well.)

[Two actors], Chris and *I*, were selected to do the last scene of *King Lear*.

The company could afford to send only [one of two researchers], Dr. Davis or *me*, to Paris.

PRONOUN AFTER THAN OR AS

Test: Mentally complete the sentence.

The supervisor claimed that she was much more experienced than *I* [was].

Gloria admitted that she liked Greg's twin better than [she liked] *him*.

WE OR US BEFORE A NOUN

Test: Mentally delete the noun.

We [women] really have come a long way.

Sadly, discrimination against *us* [women] occurs in most cultures.

PRONOUN BEFORE OR AFTER AN INFINITIVE

Remember that both subjects and objects of infinitives take the objective case.

Everyone expected Alan and *me* to defeat Tracy and *him* in the doubles tournament.

PRONOUN OR NOUN BEFORE A GERUND

Remember to use the possessive case when a pronoun modifies a gerund.

There is only a small chance of *his* bleeding excessively because of this procedure.