

Choosing between *who* and *whom*

In subordinate clauses, use *who* and *whoever* for subjects or subject complements, *whom* and *whomever* for all objects.

When *who* and *whom* (or *whoever* and *whomever*) introduce subordinate clauses, their case is determined by their function *within the clause they introduce*. To choose the correct pronoun, you must isolate the subordinate clause and then decide how the pronoun functions within it.

In the following two examples, the pronouns *who* and *whoever* function as the subjects of the clauses they introduce.

- ▶ First prize goes to the runner ^{*who*} ~~whom~~ collects the most points.

The subordinate clause is *who collects the most points*. The verb of the clause is *collects*, and its subject is *who*.

- ▶ He tells the story of his narrow escape to ^{*whoever*} ~~whomever~~ will listen.

The writer selected the pronoun *whomever*, thinking that it was the object of the preposition *to*. However, the object of the preposition is the entire subordinate clause *whoever will listen*. The verb of the clause is *will listen*, and the subject of the verb is *whoever*.

Who occasionally functions as a subject complement in a subordinate clause. Subject complements occur with linking verbs (usually *be*, *am*, *is*, *are*, *was*, *were*, *being*, and *been*).

- ▶ From your social security number, anyone can find out ^{*who*} ~~whom~~ you are.

The subordinate clause is *who you are*. Its subject is *you*, and its subject complement is *who*.

When functioning as an object in a subordinate clause, *whom* (or *whomever*) appears out of order, before both the subject and the verb. To choose the correct pronoun, you must mentally restructure the clause.

- ▶ You will work with our senior traders, ^{*whom*} ~~who~~ you will meet later.

The subordinate clause is *whom you will meet later*. The subject of the clause is *you* and the verb is *will meet*. *Whom* is the direct object of the verb. The correct choice becomes clear if you mentally restructure the clause: *you will meet whom*.

When functioning as the object of a preposition in a subordinate clause, *whom* is often separated from its preposition.

- ▶ The tutor ^{*whom*} ~~who~~ I was assigned to was very supportive.

Whom is the object of the preposition *to*. In this sentence, the writer might choose to drop *whom*: *The tutor I was assigned to was very supportive*.

(continued)

NOTE: Inserted expressions such as *they know*, *I think*, and *she says* should be ignored in determining whether to use *who* or *whom*.

- ▶ All of the show-offs, bullies, and tough guys in school want to take on a big guy ^{who}~~whom~~ they know will not hurt them.
Who is the subject of *will hurt*, not the object of *know*.

In questions, use *who* and *whoever* for subjects, *whom* and *whomever* for all objects.

When *who* and *whom* (or *whoever* and *whomever*) are used to open questions, their case is determined by their function within the question. In the example at the bottom of the next page, *who* functions as the subject of the question.

When *whom* functions as the object of a verb or the object of a preposition in a question, it appears out of normal order. To choose the correct pronoun, you must mentally restructure the question.

- ▶ ^{Who}~~Whom~~ was responsible for creating that computer virus?
Who is the subject of the verb *was*.

- ▶ ^{Whom}~~Who~~ did the Democratic Party nominate in 1992?
Whom is the direct object of the verb *did nominate*. This becomes clear if you restructure the question: *The Democratic Party did nominate whom in 1992?*

- ▶ ^{Whom}~~Who~~ did you enter into the contract with?
Whom is the object of the preposition *with*, as is clear if you recast the question: *You did enter into the contract with whom?*

Use *whom* for subjects or 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.

- ▶ On the subject of health care, I don't know ^{whom}~~who~~ to believe.

NOTE: In spoken English, *who* is frequently used when the correct *whom* sounds too stuffy. Even educated speakers are likely to say *Who* [not *Whom*] *did Joe replace?* Although some readers will accept such constructions in informal written English, it is safer to use *whom* in formal English: *Whom did Joe replace?*

(continued)

Checking for problems with *who* and *whom*

Look for common trouble spots; where possible, apply a test for correct usage.

IN A SUBORDINATE CLAUSE

Isolate the subordinate clause. Then read its subject, verb, and any objects, restructuring the clause if necessary. Some writers find it helpful to substitute *he* for *who* and *him* for *whom*.

Samuels hoped to become the business partner of (whoever / whomever) found the treasure.

Test: . . . *whoever* found the treasure. [. . . *he* found the treasure.]

Ada always seemed to be bestowing a favor on (whoever / whomever) she worked for.

Test: . . . she worked for *whomever*. [. . . she worked for *him*.]

IN A QUESTION

Read the subject, verb, and any objects, rearranging the sentence structure if necessary.

(Who / Whom) conferred with Roosevelt and Stalin at Yalta in 1945?

Test: *Who* conferred . . . ?

(Who / Whom) did the committee nominate?

Test: The committee did nominate *whom*?