

Who vs. Whom

Perhaps no aspect of modern English confuses more writers and speakers than knowing when to use “who” and “whom.” Each word has its own function, and knowing those functions is the key to using them correctly.

The pronoun “who” functions either as the sentence’s subject or a nominative pronoun in the predicate; that is, it names a particular “someone” in the predicate. Here a couple of examples: **Who** is going to the game?” In this case, *who* functions as the subject. I interviewed the student **who** just returned from New Zealand. Here, *who* functions as a nominative pronoun in the predicate, identifying the particular student.

The pronoun “whom” always functions as the object of either a verb or a preposition. Most writers have no trouble knowing whether to use **who** or **whom** when the word functions as an object of a preposition, such as **for** whom, **by** whom, **to** whom, and so forth. To most people, **whom** sounds correct in these situations, and it is. The trouble comes in when **whom** shows up as an object of a verb in a location where one would normally find the subject of a sentence or a clause. Remember we stated earlier that **who** functions as a subject. In these cases, **whom** sounds awkward to many people. Consider the sentence “**Whom** do you wish to see?” The word *whom* is the direct object of the verb *see*, but it’s in a spot where we would normally find a subject, so it sounds a little unnatural. But think of the same sentence rewritten as “You wish to see **whom**?”

Now let’s consider one with an even more twisted structure: You sent **whom** a letter? Here, *whom* functions as the indirect object of the verb *sent*. But again, think of the same sentence rewritten as “You sent a letter to whom?”

A simple way to tell whether you should use *who* or *whom* is to use the *he* or *him* substitution rule. Consider the following sentence: Everyone knows _____ stole the candy. Should the blank be *who* or *whom*? To tell which is correct, fill in the blank with the words *he* and *him*. Everyone knows *him* stole the candy. Everyone knows *he* stole the candy. Of course, “he” is correct. When *he* is correct, use *who*. When *him*—which ends with the letter *m*—is correct, use *whom*, which also ends with *m*.

Sometimes it may be necessary to rearrange the awkward sentence just a bit, as in the following: _____ will the dean appoint to the committee? First, rearrange the sentence to get the subject out front: The dean will appoint _____ to the committee. Now let’s do our substitutions. The dean will appoint *he* to the committee. Or the dean will appoint *him* to the committee. Obviously, *him* is correct, so the original sentence should read “Whom will the dean appoint to the committee?”

And finally, the words *they* and *them* can also be used as substitutions in plural structures. And once again, if the “m-word” is correct, use *whom*.