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.