

Who vs. Whom

Even in everyday speech, we often use “who” where, grammatically, we should use “whom.” In academic writing, though, professors and colleagues may be less lenient when noticing this mistake. Learning when to correctly use “whom” will polish your writing and distinguish your speech skills, too! This guide will walk you through how to master the distinction.

Who, a subjective pronoun, is used as a subject, subject complement, or appositive. **Whom, an objective pronoun**, is used as a direct or indirect object, an object of a preposition, an object of an infinitive, or an appositive renaming an object.

Who	Whom
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Equivalent pronouns: she, he, I, they • Subjective pronoun • Corresponds to “whoever” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Equivalent pronouns: her, him, me, them* • Objective pronoun • Corresponds to “whomever”

*notice many of “whom’s” equivalent pronouns also have the letter “m” in them

A **subject** is the noun doing the action in a sentence:

She wrote the novel.

Who read the novel?

A **subject complement** is a word or phrase associated with a linking verb like “is” or “are” that describes the subject:

They are artistic.

The artist is who?

An **appositive** is a word or phrase that renames or further defines the subject:

The whale, an immature minke, just surfaced.

The swimmer, who is competitive, just dove.

Another type of **appositive** can rename the object of a sentence instead of the subject:

I spy a doe, a female deer.

I spy a spy, who entered the hotel.

A **direct object** is the word the subject acts upon:

He pushed the canoe.

She pushed whom?

An **indirect object** is the person or thing receiving the direct object:

I gave them the brochure.

To whom did they give the brochure?

The **object of a preposition** is the word a preposition interacts with:

She jumped into the lake.

Whom did he run into?

The **object of an infinitive** is the word or phrase an infinitive verb acts upon:

They wanted to view the manual.

They wanted to race whom?

In a Question

To decide whether to use “who” or “whom” in a question, change the question into a statement and use an equivalent pronoun:

1. Who/Whom is he calling? → He is calling she or her.

The statement only makes sense when using “her,” an equivalent pronoun to “whom.” This is because the pronoun acts as an object. Therefore, the correct form of the question should use “whom”:

Whom is he calling?

2. Who/Whom are those brilliant writers? → They or Them are those brilliant writers.

This statement only makes sense when using “they,” an equivalent pronoun to “who.” This is because the pronoun acts as a subject. Therefore, the correct form of the question should use “who”:

Who are those brilliant writers?

3. Whoever/Whomever will we call? → We will call they or them.

This statement only makes sense when using “them,” an equivalent pronoun to “whomever.” This is because the pronoun acts as an object. Therefore, the correct form of the question should use “whomever”:

Whomever will we call?

In a Dependent Clause

The same technique can be used with sentences that have dependent clauses, or a subject-verb phrase that cannot stand alone. Just isolate the dependent clause from the rest of the sentence, rearrange it as need to make it a complete sentence, and replace who/whom with an equivalent pronoun:

1. The baffled man wondered who/whom would do this. → ~~The baffled man wondered~~
They or them would do this.

The isolated dependent clause only makes sense when using “they,” an equivalent pronoun to “who.” The pronoun acts as the subject of the dependent clause. Therefore, the correct form of the full sentence should use “who”:

The baffled man wondered **who** would do this.

2. The princess’s rescuer was not who/whom she had expected. → ~~The princess’s rescuer~~
~~was~~ She had not expected he or him.

This isolated dependent clause only makes sense when using “him,” an equivalent pronoun to “whom.” The pronoun acts as the object of the dependent clause. Therefore, the correct form of the full sentence should use “whom”:

The princess’s rescuer was not **whom** she had expected.

3. Whoever/Whomever can speak the language should talk to them first. → She or her can
speak the language. ~~should talk to them first~~

The isolated clause only makes sense when using “she,” an equivalent pronoun to “whoever.” The pronoun acts as the subject of the dependent clause. Therefore, the correct form of the full statement should use “whoever”:

Whoever can speak the language should talk to them first.

Ready for some practice?

Choose the correct pronoun in each sentence and indicate if the pronoun is in the subject or object position:

1. Who/Whom broke the coffee maker?
2. For who/whom are they bringing food?
3. If you do not make your dreams come true, who/whom will?
4. They are the sailors who/whom I most look up to.
5. She is the captain who/whom runs this boat.
6. I cannot boss around whoever/whomever I want.
7. Whoever/Whomever hears the call of the wild must answer.

1. Who (subject)
2. Whom (object)
3. Who (subject)
4. Whom (object)
5. Who (subject)
6. Whomever (object)
7. Whoever (subject)

Works Cited

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