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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who</th>
<th>Whom</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>● Equivalent pronouns: she, he, I, they</td>
<td>● Equivalent pronouns: her, him, me, them*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Subjective pronoun</td>
<td>● Objective pronoun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Corresponds to “whoever”</td>
<td>● Corresponds to “whomever”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*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**?

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**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.

Works Cited
