



CHOOSING THE RIGHT PRONOUN AND WHO OR WHOM

Of the many kinds of pronouns, the following cause the most difficulty:

Subject Group

I
he
she
we
they
who

Object Group

me
him
her
us
them
whom

- ▶ A pronoun in the **subject group** may be used as the subject of a verb:

He is my brother. -- -- -- -- -- *He* is the subject of the verb *is*.
We boys gave a party. -- -- -- -- -- *We* is the subject of the verb *gave*.
Bob is taller than **I**. -- -- -- -- -- This sentence is not written out in full.
It means “Bob is taller than **I am**.”
I is the subject of the verb *am*.
Beth plays as well as **he**. -- -- -- -- -- This sentence is not written out in full.
It means “Beth plays as well as **he does**.”
He is the subject of the verb *does*.

- ▶ A pronoun from the **subject group** is also used when the word means the same as the subject:

The boy in the red coat is **he**. -- -- -- -- -- *He* is a word that means the same as the subject *boy*. Therefore, the pronoun from the subject group is used.
It was **she** all right. -- -- -- -- -- *She* means the same as the subject *it*.
Therefore, the pronoun from the subject group is used.

Note: Modern usage of these pronouns allows some exceptions to this rule. “It is me” and “It is us” may be used in informal speech instead of the grammatically correct “It is I” and “It is we.”

- ▶ Pronouns in the **object group** are used for all other purposes:

The pronouns used in the following examples are not used as subjects of sentences, nor are they used as words that mean the same as subjects. Therefore, they come from the object group.

He came with Lynn and **me**. -- -- -- -- -- A good way to tell which pronoun to use is to leave out the extra name: He came with *me*.
He gave **us** girls a pony. -- -- -- -- -- He gave *us* a pony.

Choosing between **who** and **whom**:

Like the personal pronouns (*he, she, her, them*, etc.), the pronoun **who** is used in the subject group, and **whom** is used for the object group. *Who* and *whom* are used as **interrogative** pronouns and as **relative** pronouns.

- ▶ **Who** and **whom** are **interrogative pronouns** when they are used to ask a question.

Who broke his leg? -- -- -- -- The subject form is used because *who* is the subject of *broke*.

Whom did Nora choose? -- -- -- The object form is used because *whom* receives the action of *did choose*.

Note: You may find it helpful to substitute *he, she, or they* for *who* and *her, him, or them* for *whom*. If *he, she, or they* fits the sentence, then *who* will be correct. If *her, him, or them* fits, then use *whom*.

Who broke his leg? —or— **He** broke his leg?
You wouldn't say, "*Him* broke his leg?" Therefore, choose *who*, the subject group.

Whom did Nora choose? —or— Nora did choose **him**. (Reword questions into statements.)
You wouldn't say, "Nora did choose *he*." Therefore, choose *whom*, the object case.

- ▶ When **who** and **whom** are used to begin a subordinate clause, they are **relative pronouns**. The case of the pronoun beginning a subordinate clause is determined by its use in the clause. The case is not affected by any word outside the clause. Use *who* for the subject of the clause and *whom* for the object.

Harry Houdini, **whom** audiences adored, performed daring escape tricks.

The subordinate clause is *whom audiences adored*. Would you substitute *he* or *him*? "Audiences adored *him*."

Anybody **who** orders now will receive a free gift.

The subordinate clause is *who orders now*. Would you substitute *she* or *her*? "*She* orders now."

Note: Although *whom* is becoming increasingly uncommon in spoken English, the distinction between *who* and *whom* in subordinate clauses is usually observed in writing.

Revised 2005

College Writing Center
at Meramec