

# Understanding the Difference: Who and Whom

*Who* does the bell toll for? For *who* does the bell toll? *Whom* does the bell toll for?  
And does it matter??

**INTRODUCTION** As a college student, you will probably be expected to know when to use the pronouns *who* and *whom* correctly. The purpose of this handout is to give you a general understanding of the grammatical difference between *who* and *whom*.

**EXPLANATION** In Modern English, a word's function is usually not identified by form but by position in a sentence. Take the word *friend*. Is it the subject of the sentence? The object? We don't know. The only way to determine its grammatical function is by its position: "My *friend* lives nearby" (subject), or "I called my *friend*" (object). Why is this important?

**EXAMPLE** In most ancient languages, including English, words changed form to reflect their function (the formal term is called "inflection"). Over time, English lost most of its inflections. However a few vestiges remain. Take the pronouns *he* and *him*. Grammatically speaking, *he* is the subject and *him* is the object. Let's look at a simple example. Read the two sentences below. Which is grammatically correct?

*I called he.*      OR      *I called him.*

Most native speakers of English know that "I called him" is correct and that "I called he" is incorrect. What they might not know is the error has to do with this idea of inflection: Meaning is contained in form—position doesn't matter. You could say "I called *him*" or "*Him* I called" and both would be correct because *him* always functions as the object.

Subject	Verb	Object	Object	Subject	Verb
I	called	him.	Him	I	called.

The same concept applies to the pronouns *who* and *whom*. Many people get confused about when to use one or the other (Is it "Who am I speaking to?" or "To whom am I speaking?"). Once we understand that *who* always functions the subject and that *whom* always functions as the object, we'll understand that "To whom am I speaking?" is correct because *whom* is the object of the preposition *to*.

Still confused? Read on...

## RULE

A simple rule to keep in mind is that **who/whom** is a pair of pronouns just like **he/him, she/her, they/ them**. Generally speaking:

- If you would use *he/she/they*, use **who**.
- If you would use *him/her/the*), use **whom**.

## PRACTICE

### Pronouns Used as the Subject

**Who**, I, we, you, he, she they

### Pronouns Used as the Object

**Whom**, me, us, you, him, her, them

To choose correctly among the forms of *who*, first re-phrase the sentence or the clause using one of the corresponding pronouns from the box above. Then select the correct form of who or whom. The first one has been done for you. Answers are on the next page.

**Question** (Who, Whom) do you think is responsible?

**Re-Phrase:** Do you think he is responsible?

**Answer:** Who do you think is responsible?

**Question** (Who, Whom) shall we ask to the party?

**Rephrase:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Answer:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Question** Mrs. Dimwit consulted an astrologer (who, whom) she met in Seattle.

**Rephrase:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Answer:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Question** Mr. Jones is the man (who, whom) I went fishing with last spring.

**Rephrase:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Answer:** \_\_\_\_\_

Joyce is the girl (who, whom) got the job.

**Rephrase:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Answer:** \_\_\_\_\_

## QUIZZES

Here are some interactive quizzes for more practice:

[http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/cgi-shl/quiz.pl/who\\_quiz.htm](http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/cgi-shl/quiz.pl/who_quiz.htm)

[http://www.grammarbook.com/grammar\\_quiz/who\\_1.asp](http://www.grammarbook.com/grammar_quiz/who_1.asp)

## MORE

## INFORMATION

Cases of Nouns and Pronouns

<http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/cases.htm>

“Who is Correct?”

<http://web.ku.edu/~edit/whom.html>

## Answers to Practice Questions

### Pronouns Used as the Subject

**Who**, I, we, you, he, she they

### Pronouns Used as the Object

**Whom**, me, us, you, him, her, them

**Question:** (Who, Whom) shall we ask to the party?

**Rephrase:** We shall ask **him** to the party.

**Answer:** **Whom** shall we ask to the party?

**Question** Mrs. Dimwit consulted an astrologer (who, whom) she met in Seattle.

**Rephrase:** Mrs. Dimwit consulted an astrology. She met **her** in Seattle.

**Answer:** Mrs. Dimwit consulted an astrologer **whom** she met in Seattle.

**Question** Mr. Jones is the man (who, whom) I went fishing with last spring.

**Rephrase:** Mr. Jones is the man. I went fishing with **him** last spring.

**Answer:** Mr. Jones is the man with **whom** I went fishing last spring (or, Mr. Jones is the man **whom** I went fishing with last spring).

**Question** Joyce is the girl (who, whom) got the job.

**Rephrase:** Joyce is the girl. **She** got the job.

**Answer:** Joyce is the girl **who** got the job.