Who vs. Whom

Students often encounter difficulty in deciding whether to use who or whom. Two sentence patterns in particular lead to confusion with these words: sentences that begin with a question, and sentences that introduce a dependent clause. Deciding on the appropriate pronoun requires grammatical analysis, noting the differences between subjective personal pronouns (pronouns that perform an action) and objective personal pronouns (pronouns that receive an action). Who is a subjective pronoun; whom is objective.

1. Introduction of a Question

When the answer to the question begins with a subjective personal pronoun (e.g., he, she, or they), use who.

Who is the best pitcher on the team? He is the best pitcher on the team. [He is subjective; therefore, who is correct.]

When the answer to the question is an objective personal pronoun (e.g., her, him, or them), use whom.

For whom did you vote? I voted for her. [Her is objective; therefore, whom is correct.]

2. Introduction of a Dependent Clause

When the pronoun acts as the subject of the clause, use who.

He is a wonderful man who is destined for great things. [Who is the subject of the clause “who is destined for great things” – or – (S)he is destined for great things.]

When the pronoun acts as the object of the clause, use whom.

The man at the door was not whom she had expected. [Whom is the object of the clause “whom she had expected” – or – she had expected him/her.]

Note: In distinguishing between whoever and whomever, the same rules apply.

Test Yourself

1. Research has shown that children (who/whom) have been overprotected often become adults for (who/whom) life is difficult beyond the family circle.
2. Parents often transmit to their children ideas about (who/whom) to respect in society.
3. (Who/Whom) was at the game last night?
4. Ray, (who/whom) we all know and love, will not be attending this week’s meeting.
5. To (who/whom) did you speak about the job opening?

Answers: 1. who, who, whom 2. who, whom 3. who, whom 4. whom, whom

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