

# Your editor's cheat sheet

English is complicated and can confuse the best of us. Many editors have dog-eared grammar manuals and style books with Post-It notes on the sections we have to double-check every time. Here's one fine point that even experienced editors find hard to memorize.

## When to use *who* and *whom*

The short answer to the *who/whom* question is that *who* is for subjects and *whom* is for objects. Only it isn't that simple, or why would we all keep asking one another, "Is this right?"

As you've probably realized, the problem is declension.

*Who*, *what*, and *which* are all interrogative pronouns as well as relative pronouns. *That* is also a relative pronoun. *Who* declines, while the others don't.

For guidance, look to personal pronouns, which also decline.

Nominative	Objective	Possessive
they	them	theirs
who	whom	whose

Clears everything right up, doesn't it?

One way to remember which pronoun to use is to rewrite the sentence with *they* or *them* instead. *Them* and *whom* both end with M, so where you would use *them*, use *whom*.

Linguists have debated for decades whether *whom* is so unmanageable it ought to be retired, and *who* treated like all the other relative pronouns. Advocates of common usage say *who* can—and often is—used without confusion in places where *whom* was traditionally used. For example: "*Who did you meet?*" Advocates of traditional usage argue for maintaining the distinction because...well, because it's traditional. If this is the camp you choose, here's how it's done.

**Interrogative nominative:** Or, as we say in English, a question's subject.

*Who came to dinner?*  
*It was who?*

**Interrogative objective:** Which is to say, a question's object. In these examples, *he* is the subject. *Whom* is the object of a verb or preposition.

*Whom did he invite to dinner?*  
*To whom is he referring?*



## Watch out for those nested clauses

Bryan Garner points out, in his chapter on grammar in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, that the inverted syntax of some questions misleads people to use *whom* when *who* is called for, as in the incorrect “*Whom should I say is calling?*” It might seem that since the word *I* is the subject, *whom* must be the object. But there are two clauses here. “*Should I say*” is inserted into the clause “*who is calling.*” *Who* is the subject of the verb *calling*.

Nested clauses can also cause confusion when using relative pronouns. Use the nominative case if no subject comes between the pronoun and the verb. But if a subject intervenes, the pronoun must match the clause that contains it.

*The intern who joined us today is smart.*

*The intern, whom I thought punctual, missed her deadline.*

I did the thinking, so *whom* is in the objective case in the nested clause, even though *the intern* is the subject of the surrounding clause, “*The intern missed her deadline.*” Sometimes you must take your sentence apart to ensure you get the right pronoun in each clause.

## Choose your style

Because its traditional use has diminished in everyday speech, *whom* is seen as formal and old-fashioned—in a good way. If you want to be seen as a traditional, formal writer—or are writing about a traditional, formal character—then continue observing the finer points of *whom* usage.

But, as *The Yahoo Style Guide* says, “If all else fails, use *who*.” Yes, Yahoo, as you might expect, falls on the casual side. That’s because sometimes the traditionally correct form (e.g., “*Whom did he invite to dinner?*”) sounds not just old-fashioned, but also stilted.

Depending on your audience—or, in the case of fiction, your character—you may side with Yahoo and the linguists, choosing common usage and writing *who* in all cases except those with a preposition (e.g., “*To whom did he send invitations?*”). Know your audience well enough to determine whether they will find “*Who did he invite?*” casual—in a good way.



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My mission is to help writers polish their work till it shines and to help non-writers get ideas out of their heads and into print. I’m a member of the Florida Writers Association, the Editorial Freelancers Association, American Christian Fiction Writers, and the Christian Proofreaders and Editors Network. Find me on LinkedIn, Facebook, or Twitter.

I hope this cheat sheet helped you. Please send me your grammar, usage, and style questions. I’ll answer your question directly and on my blog, so please let me know if I may use your name.

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