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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Verb</th>
<th>Object</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>called he.</td>
<td>him</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>called him.</td>
<td>Him</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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/they*, use *whom*.

PRACTICE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pronouns Used as the Subject</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Who, I, we, you, he, she, they</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pronouns Used as the Object</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Whom, me, us, you, him, her, them</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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://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 astrologer whom she met 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 whom I went fishing with last spring.
**Answer**: Mr. Jones is the man whom I went fishing with last spring (or, Mr. Jones is the man who 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.