

KB CommEntary

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Greetings!

Batter Up!

Ah, the sweetest sound of all! In this edition of *KB CommEntary*, you too can step up to the plate and take your hacks at using *who* and *whom* correctly.

What's Up at KB COMM?

At KB COMM, we provide mission-critical communication and learning services to clients in a variety of industries. Thanks to our established and new clients for keeping us fully engaged. Recent and ongoing projects include:

- Creating and revising job descriptions for the Careers website of a high-tech manufacturer
- Writing and editing numerous information products for a healthcare diagnostics manufacturer, including communications to employees from the CEO and executive leadership team, customer letters, press releases, and an employee newsletter
- Writing, formatting, and performing quality control reviews of large, complex chemical residue studies intended for regulatory submission on behalf of a federally funded, cooperative research organization
- Writing supplements and formatting modules of electronic submissions to FDA for a pharmaceutical manufacturing company

KB COMM LLC is a certified Women's Business Enterprise. We are officially qualified to participate in corporations' woman- and minority-owned vendor programs.

Please keep us in mind for your communication or training projects.

Tips and Tales

Who's Who, or Is It Whom?

That's right, folks! Based on your comments about how you were affected by the effects of our last missive, we figured it was time to open another can of grammatical worms, just for the wriggly fun of it. In this issue, we thought it would be amusing to try to get a firm grip on the correct use of *who* versus *whom*.

X First, it's helpful to know that both *who* and *whom* are pronouns—they serve as substitutes or stand-ins for nouns. Often they grease the skids by filling in for nouns in sentences or clauses phrased as questions. For example, would you rather say:

Which person among you released the canines?

or

Who let the dogs out?

See what we mean? *Who* and its sibling *whom* make communicating more efficient.

The key to using *who* and *whom* correctly is to figure out the grammatical function they perform in the sentence or clause. Let's quickly review some basic parts of speech.

All sentences have, at the very least, a subject and a verb. The subject is the actor, and the verb is the action:

Sally washed.

Birds fly.

Now keep up with us here. In addition to a subject and verb, many sentences have an object. The object is the entity or thing that the subject acts upon. For example:

Sally washed her hair.

You win the Buick! *Hair* is the object of subject Sally's washing activity. Why is this important? Because distinguishing subject versus object is the skill you must master to use *who* and *whom* correctly.

Important concept #1—use *who* as the subject of a sentence or clause. For example:

Who let the dogs out? (We still want to know.)

Who washed her hair? (We're guessing it was Sally.)

The woman *who* showed us to our table was very friendly.

Uh-oh. The first two are straightforward enough, but what's going on with our hostess in example 3? What we have here is a sentence that contains a subordinate clause—who showed us to our table. Observant readers will note that we're actually dealing with two subjects—one for the main sentence (woman) and another for the subordinate clause (who). Even though *who* is not the main subject of the sentence, it is nonetheless the subject of the clause. Therefore, *who* is the appropriate form.

Important concept #2—use *whom* as the direct or indirect object of a sentence or clause. For example:

I will invite *whomever* I wish.

Whom shall I trust?

And of course, the big one:

Do not ask for *whom* the bell tolls.

In examples 1 and 2, *whomever* and *whom* are direct objects. In example 3, *for whom* is the indirect object. You grammarians will note that *tolls* is used as an intransitive verb in this example, which means it does not take a direct object.

We admit that figuring out when to use *whom* can be tricky. Try rephrasing the sentence or question if you're having trouble deciding which words are the subject and object. For example, if you rephrase "Whom shall I trust" as "I shall trust whom," it makes it easier to see that *I* is the subject of the sentence (I trust), and that *whom* must therefore be the object.

Grammar Girl (see the Links page on our website) notes that *who* is the pronoun that substitutes for the noun *he* and *whom* the pronoun that stands in for the noun *him*. Therefore, she suggests trying both *he* and *him* in place of *who/whom* to see which one sounds correct. For example, would you say "I trust he" or "I trust him?" Obviously, you would say "I trust him." Note that both *whom* and *him* end in *m*, a convenient mnemonic. So if you would use *him*, *whom* is the correct choice; conversely, if you would use *he*, *who* is the correct pronoun.

Prepositions such as *to*, *for*, and *in* signal indirect objects and are always followed by *whom*. And watch out for those subordinate clauses. For example:

I will ask *whomever*.

but

I will ask *whoever* is interested.

In the first example, *whomever* is the direct object. But in the second example, *whoever* is the subject of the subordinate clause *whoever is interested*.

Using *who* and *whom* correctly isn't that difficult if you just think it through. And if you can't bring yourself to do that, by all means give KB COMM a call! We'll be happy to help.X

And please remember, *when it has to be right*, KB COMM is here to help.

Sincerely,

Kathy

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KB COMM

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