

HOW TO USE WHOM CORRECTLY

From *Writing Made Easy: Just the Basics*
by Timothy Sharkey

Using the word *whom* in a sentence can be challenging for most people. In fact, most people avoid using the word *whom* altogether. They just use the word *who* all the time, which is perfectly acceptable. As a matter of fact, *whom* may be considered stilted or academic or ostentatious, and some people in some places may take umbrage at its use. However, using the word *whom* correctly in a cover letter to a job application, or using the word *whom* correctly in a job interview, might help increase your chances of getting that job. It will make you sound well-educated.

The traditional way of learning how to use the word *whom* in a sentence is as *an object of a preposition* (such as *to, for, of, by, or with, etc.*). But I think that this way of learning how to use the word *whom* is difficult. I prefer to explain how to use the word *whom* as the word referring to the second party in a sentence who receives the action from the first party.

A sentence, in other words, often contains two parties or two people (called a subject [primary person] and an object [a secondary person]). *Who* always refers to the first party (giving the action) and *whom* always refers to the second party (receiving the action).

Who is yelling at whom? is a perfect example. It contains the first party yelling at the second party. The first party is *giving* the action (it is yelling at the second party), and it is referred to as *who*. The second party is *receiving* the action (it is being yelled at), and it is referred to as *whom*.

You can write the letter *G* (for *Gives*) above the person in a sentence who *gives* the action and write the letter *R* (for *Receives*) above the person in a sentence who *receives* the action from the other party. This can help you see more clearly who is who. The person who gives the action (*G*) is referred to as *who* and the person who *receives* the action (*R*) is referred to as *whom*. *Whoever* and *whomever* work in exactly the same way.

“He kissed her” is an example of a sentence that contains two parties as well: a man (the subject) *gives* the action, the kiss, and a woman (the object), the second party, *receives* the action, the kiss. *Who* is referred to as the *giver* of the action and *whom* is referred to as the *receiver* of the action – every time. Therefore, you could turn this sentence around and ask, “*Whom did he kiss?*”

“Whom did you give the book to?” is another example of a sentence that contains two people, and it uses the word *whom* correctly. The person *receiving* the action (*receiving* the book) is referred to as *whom* and the person who *gave* the action (*gave* the book) is referred to as *who*.

“To whom it may concern” is a phrase that uses the word *whom* correctly because the person *receiving* the action (*receiving* the concern) is referred to as *whom* and the person who *gave* the action (*gave* the concern) is referred to as *who*.

“*For Whom the Bell Tolls*” is a phrase that uses the word *whom* correctly because the person *receiving* the action (*receiving* the tolling) is referred to as *whom* and the person who *gave* the action (*gave* the tolling) is referred to as *who*.

“Who is chasing Jim?” on the other hand, uses the word *who* correctly because the person *giving* the action (*giving* the chase) is referred to as *who* and the person *receiving* the chase, Jim, is referred to as *whom*. You could turn this phrase around and ask, “Whom is Jim being chased by?”

“Who does she think she is?” is another example of a sentence that uses the word *who* correctly because there is only one person in this sentence, not two: she.