



Focus

To whom it may concern

What should editors do about the *whom* vs *who* debate?
Jeremy Butterfield

As far as I'm concerned, 'whom' is a word
that was invented to make everyone sound like a butler.

Calvin Trillin

Serendipitously, just hours after the CIEP asked me to write about *whom*, an email landed in my inbox. It included this: 'Patients *whom* have already received notification ...'.

That's a classic example of the (mis)use of *whom* in formal/official writing. People (mis)use *whom* in such contexts to project a would-be authoritative tone of voice. Their practice unwittingly validates the American journalist Calvin Trillin's merry quip.¹

Is that all *whom* really is? *Who's* rather pushed-up sibling? This is clearly a 'straw man' question to be swiftly knocked down since I'm sure, dear readers and editors, you all know that *whom* has a clear grammatical (syntactic) function. Or does it? I'll come back to that later. This article seeks answers to three questions:

1. Is *whom* now redundant?
2. How formal is it?
3. When, if ever, is it obligatory?

For the impatient, I can answer the last question in short order here and now: it is never *absolutely* obligatory. That is, there is always another way of expressing the thought without resorting to *whom*. However, in writing very much more so than in speech, *whom* is still deemed desirable in certain constructions which I tabulate and discuss later on.

Is *whom* on the way out? A few figures

Reports of its death are greatly exaggerated, to misquote Mark Twain. It's been around since Old English and retains the shape of an OE case ending. In 1921 Sapir surmised² that two centuries thence it would be as archaic as the Elizabethan *his* for *its*. A single century on his prophecy rings hollow: formal it may sound, but archaic? Google Ngrams, which covers printed material from 1800 onwards, shows a very steady decline over that period, but *whom* has not yet given up the ghost.³ In the British Parliament it certainly will not just lie down and die. While *Hansard* shows it to be less than half as frequent as it was in 1800, it is nevertheless still twice as frequent in those august chambers as in general language: roughly 190 times per million words vs less than 100 per million.⁴

About the author

Jeremy Butterfield is the editor of *Fowler's Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (2015) published by Oxford University Press. OUP commissioned his book *Damp Squid: The English language laid bare*, which Alexander McCall Smith described as 'irresistible'. Previously he was editor-in-chief of Collins Dictionaries, where he applied his extensive knowledge of European languages. He blogs for Collins Dictionaries website and for his own site. He also teaches clear writing to businesses and institutions. A CIEP Professional Member, he lives in Dunblane.



Looking at how often words we are interested in occur per million words of text measures their frequency, as in the figures just noted. Comparing *who* with *whom* shows *who* at 2,316 per million words vs *whom* at 96. In other words, *who* is 24 times more frequent. Let's assume for the sake of argument that half those *whos* are subject pronouns; that still makes 'objective' *who* 12 times more frequent than *whom*.

Another way of looking at the data is to calculate on average how many words you would read to come across an instance of *who* or *whom*; the answer is a mere 431 and a whopping 10,000. Those figures come from a mixed corpus of written language.⁵ Bearing in mind the informality of Twitter,⁶ you probably won't be surprised to hear that *whom* is much rarer still there: **you would have to read a full 110,000 words to come across one instance on Twitter.**

Finally, another way of assessing their relative prominence is where they sit in the rankings – a sort of league table of words. *Who* is the forty-sixth most common word in English; *whom* is threatened with relegation at position 1,037. (Bear in mind that the top 1,000 words constitute 75 per cent of the content of all texts.) As we will see, in one set of patterns *whom* is still desirable in writing, and in another pretty much obligatory. (The obverse is that everywhere else it is optional and a formality marker, though the intensity of formality, I submit, varies.)

What is whom?

Meanwhile, back to basics: what class of word is *whom*? A pronoun, which means, putting it simplistically, that it stands in for a noun. So, just like *who*, it can be used in a question as an interrogative pronoun, and elsewhere as a relative pronoun.

But unlike *who*, you may only use it as the **object** of a verb or preposition. That is where my email example gets snared in the self-laid trap of self-important formality. However, if it's any consolation, *whom* as grammatical subject goes back beyond the King James biblical

| He saith unto them, But *whom* say ye that I am?

Matthew 16:15

to the tenth-century West Saxon gospels.

A dictionary definition and examples

The *Oxford Online Dictionary of English (OODE)* – not the *OED* – reads:

Used instead of 'who' as the object of a verb or preposition.

It provides two immediately visible examples, then 20 more you click to reveal.

| Whom did he marry?

and

| Her mother, in whom she confided, said it wasn't easy for her.

That 'used instead of' is coy: it doesn't say under what circumstances or whether/when it is obligatory. So, *who* should an editor or writer turn to? Their own ear or sense of English might – even should – guide them in the first instance. Failing that, usage guides and dictionaries. To be fair, the *OODE* entry does cross-refer you to a usage note.

Of the guides consulted only two offer (relatively) straightforward advice, namely, *Garner's Dictionary of Legal Usage* (online, undated) and *Fowler's Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (4th edn, 2015). The other two consulted are *The Cambridge Guide to English Usage*⁷ by Pam Peters and the deeply scholarly *Merriam-Webster Concise Dictionary of English Usage*.⁸

Several aspects of language converge around *whom*: written vs spoken, formal vs neutral/informal registers, syntactic function, optionality, linguistic conservatism, and, finally, the shibboleth about not ending a sentence with a preposition.

Add to which that intangible thing, personal preference.

Those two examples from *OODE* fail to exhaust *whom*'s syntactic possibilities, as the further examples there show. I've tabulated them all in Table 1 because they are far from equal and deserve individual attention. Five groupings emerge, some with subcategories; some patterns are unlikely. You might like to mull them over to gauge your intuitive reaction to each. The significance of the highlighting is explained later.

Table 1. *whom* vs *who*: possible patterns

	Syntactic function	Whom	Who
1	Interrogative pronoun	Whom did you see?	Who did you see?
2a	Preposition + interrogative, sentence-initial	i. For whom is this? ii. ?Whom is this for?	iii. Who is this for? iv. *For who is this?
2b	Indirect question: preposition + interrogative, mid-sentence	i. They asked to whom I was speaking. ii. ?They asked whom I was speaking to.	iii. They asked who I was speaking to. iv. *They asked to who I was speaking.
2c	Indirect question: preposition + interrogative, sentence-final	... who has done what to whom.	... who has done what to who.
3a	Relative pronoun: defining/restrictive	... those whom God has blessed	those (who) God has blessed.
3b	Relative pronoun: non-defining/non-restrictive	... my brother Rupert, whom you've already met.	... my brother Rupert, who you've already met.
4	Preposition + relative, sentence-initial	To whom it may concern ...	?To who it may concern ...
5a	Preposition + relative, mid-sentence	i. ... his playboy father, to whom he dedicates this book. ii. ?... his playboy father, whom he dedicates this book to.	iii. *... his playboy father, to who he dedicates this book. iv. ... his playboy father, who he dedicates this book to.
5b	Numbers/partitives + <i>of whom</i>	i. ... two sons, one of whom lives with them ... ii. ... some of whom were there the week before iii. ... both of whom work full-time on the dairy ...	iv. *... two sons, one of who lives with them ... v. *... some of who were there the week before vi. *... both of who work full-time on the dairy ...

Note: ? = questionable structure; * = generally rejected structure.

Taking them in order, everyone can agree, I think, that **1**, *Whom did you see?*, is unlikely in most conversation. One can imagine a servile footman asking, '*Whom did you wish to see, sir?*' in *Downton Abbey* but that's about it. As Pam Peters notes,⁹ Noah Webster (1758–1843) long ago objected to this use of *whom* because it was not what people said. In the two centuries since, nothing has changed. Indeed, in a linguistic atlas of New England speech as long ago as 1943, only 5 per cent of speakers used *whom* in the sentence '*Whom (who) do you want?*' However, that figure rose with people of 'superior education',¹⁰ though only to under a quarter,¹¹ which suggests that *whom* in that syntactic context was, and presumably still is, a sociolinguistic marker.

It's worth pointing out that even in 1924 the entry in the *OED* stated, 'no longer current in natural colloquial speech'. And Pam Peters notes that in the *Longman Grammar* (1999) corpus of conversation, 1,000 instances of *who* were unmatched by a single *whom*.

Ask not whom the bell tolls for

In **2a**, if putting the preposition first, *whom* seems obligatory, at least in writing (Pam Peters seconds this) and desirable in speech, although in speaking most people would avoid it by putting the preposition at the end (*Who is this for?*).

I ran a poll on Twitter on 16 April 2020 about *Whom is this for?*. People were exactly evenly divided about whether it is or isn't well formed and acceptable. (To my ear it's an uneasy betwixt and between.) A poll on 17 April about *For who is this?* showed 88 per cent of people disagreeing that it was well formed and acceptable, a finding that confirms what the grammars suggest.¹²

Whom in an indirect question like **2b** – *They asked to whom I was speaking* – bespeaks a level of formality suitable mostly for writing because in speaking, as in the previous, we'd naturally flip the preposition to the end.

The alternative *They asked whom I was speaking to* sounds to my ears at least like an awkward halfway house between formality and conversation. When I tried it in a Twitter poll, nearly 20 per cent found it acceptable, but several people commented that, surely, one would replace it with *to whom*, which confirms the grammarians' cast-iron rule.

Donne's famous phrase would certainly lose all its punch as *Ask not whom the bell tolls for*.

They asked to who I had been speaking got a unanimous Twitter thumbs down in a poll on 24 April 2020. As someone commented, it's 'a mix of formal word order with an informal case form'. My recommendation would be *to whom I was speaking* only for highly formal writing (and butlers) and *who I was speaking to* for speech and neutral/less formal writing.

The example in **2c** is the stub of the OODE example *The poor reader must be as confused as Media Watch about who has done what to whom*. Because *DO/SAY/TELL*¹³ *what to whom* is a sort of set phrase, *who* sounds jarringly discordant to my ear. People's real usage according to the corpus consulted earlier confirms this in the ratio 354:24. In less set phrases like *You are never quite sure which actor is sitting where, or which voice belongs to whom*, *who* strikes me as less problematic.

The corpus ratio *to whom:who* at 48:17 tends to confirm my intuition. Recently, when I was reading a magazine article my inner grammar checker bridled at '*What will have been the most efficacious treatment? And efficacious for who?*', but the *who* there confirms what I've just been saying about a relaxation of the *whom* rule after a preposition at the end of an indirect question.

'Whom the Gods love die young' was said of yore

Byron, *Don Juan*, Canto IV, Stanza 12

English has four ways of dealing with a restrictive relative pronoun as a direct object (**3a** in the table), namely, *whom*, *who*, *that* and not using any word at all in what is known technically as a 'zero' realisation. In speech the word *that* and zero are the norm; in writing, *whom* is of course formal. Swimming against the tide, Garner is quite adamant about using *whom* in such cases: 'Though not commonly observed in informal speech, the distinction is one to be strictly followed in formal legal prose.' He puts in the dock several examples, recoiling in full shock-horror mode at their crimes: 'Some lapses are so flagrant that one can hardly fathom how they could have been committed.' Pass me the smelling salts, please, Vicar.

In non-restrictive clauses, **3b**, the only choice is *who/whom*, and *whom*, while a matter of personal taste in writing, could certainly convey pompousness in speaking/informal writing. In saying that, though, I was quite surprised to find among the Twitter examples several *whoms*, such as *There are a lot of people whom I want to meet*, in sentences where I personally wouldn't dream of using *whom* on Twitter. (There are also a few *whom-turkeys*.)

Number **4** in the table is such a set phrase that to replace *whom* would seem anomalous, I think, to most people. ('*To who*' does occur, but rarely.)

Number **5a** is interesting because the *whom/who* choice intersects with the superstition about not ending a sentence with a preposition. An arrangement as in i) is quite normal in writing and in my view is not highly formal. Judging by the results of Twitter polls for previous structures, I think version ii) would be dubious, version iii) entirely interdicted.

Finally, none of the clause structures under **5b** readily admit *who*, which would be thought of by most people as definitely non-standard grammatically.

To summarise so far, then, there is **only one recurring syntax pattern where *whom* could be obligatory** in speech as well as in writing and that is **5b**. But in speech you'd probably rephrase in any case; for example, in 5b i. as *and one of them lives with him*.

If in the other patterns you put a preposition immediately before a relative or interrogative, *whom* is the default in formal(ish) writing (highlighted in pink). But again, you can always recast the same thought by putting the preposition at the end.

The Byron quote 'Whom the Gods love die young' owes its unnatural order to being a translation – changing singular to plural – of a well-known Greek and Latin saying¹⁴ and *whom* is absolutely obligatory to make the phrase mean 'Those *whom* the Gods love'; otherwise, *who* would be the subject and the aphorism would be about people *who* love the gods. Incidentally, Wilde satirised it as 'Those *whom* the gods love grow young'.¹⁵

To *who*, my Lord?

Edgar, *King Lear*

Whom is your subject?

Which leads on to the final point, *whom* wrongly used as subject. Here's an example where it's easy to spot what's gone wrong (note also that minority *what to who*).

So far the day had gone pretty smoothly for Dawn, and the girls were sharing stories of *whom* said what to *who*.

Because of the virtually cast-iron rule (sorry, Shakespeare!) that a preposition must be followed by *whom*, we get *of whom*. But the correct parsing is that there's an underlying clause, *who said what to who*.

Parsing parentheses

More difficult to disentangle are cases with a parenthetical comment and/or where the construction in English would use the objective direct pronoun in any case. These can trip up anyone and the two factors often combine:

More wrote doctrinaire religious tracts against heretics whom, he thought, were too influential at court.

You can unpick such cases by asking 'Who did what?' You should – hopefully – then get 'he thought that ...' and 'they [heretics] were too influential'. It then becomes clear that 'were too influential' has the grammatical subject *who*.

What complicates such cases is that *to think* also takes an infinitive construction with an 'accusative' object, such as *I've always thought him to be pretty damn good*. Thus, the thing to watch out for is the commas separating the parenthesis. Without them, the *whom* could be entirely legitimate as the object of *think*, but only in a non-finite clause:

More wrote doctrinaire religious tracts against heretics whom he thought [to be] too influential at court.

Postlude

For some, such as Steven Pinker, *whom* is a superstitious relic, a saint's thigh bone to be thrown contemptuously to the dogs. For others, like Garner, it is an heirloom to be revered and protected from the grammar-befouling barbarians. For yet others, it's *who* in its best bib and tucker, *who* dressed up to the nines but occasionally gatecrashing where not invited.

I hope that this discussion will help any editor weigh this venerable word's merits and faults. And, by the by, there is homework: please look at all the examples in the *OODE* and make up your own mind in the light of what has been said.

Happy reading!



Notes

- 1 Calvin Trillin (1985). Whom says so? *The Nation*, 8 June.
- 2 Edward Sapir, *Language: An introduction to the study of speech*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, pp156–7.
- 3 Try though I might, it's impossible when talking of language in the abstract not to personify it as a living entity, so deeply embedded is this conceptual metaphor.
- 4 Although, bear in mind that *Hansard* is edited, which may account for the inclusion of a *whom* or two.
- 5 *The Oxford English Corpus* version of February 2014, containing 2.5 billion words. The frequencies are borne out by the **Corpus of Global Web-based English** (GloWbE).
- 6 The Oxford Twitter corpus, containing 22.5 million words of 2018 data.
- 7 Pam Peters (2004). *The Cambridge Guide to English Usage*. Cambridge: CUP.
- 8 *Merriam-Webster's Concise Dictionary of English Usage* (2002), 1st edn. Springfield, Mass: Merriam-Webster.
- 9 *Cambridge Guide to English Usage*, p578.
- 10 Not defined in the paper that cites this statistic.
- 11 JB McM. (1945). *The English Journal*, 34/9: 510–11.
- 12 For example, Quirk et al.'s monumental *A Grammar of Contemporary English* (1972), London: Longman, 4.119, p215, states, 'Whom is the obligatory relative pronoun as complement immediately following a preposition.'
- 13 The small caps indicate these are the lemmas or base forms of the verbs, standing for all possible inflections.
- 14 ὄν οἱ θεοὶ φιλοῦσιν ἀποθνήσκει νέος; quem di diligunt adulescens moritur
- 15 Anon. [Oscar Wilde] (1894). A few maxims for the instruction of the overeducated. *Saturday Review*, 17 November.

Resources and further reading

CIEP training 'Getting to Grips with Grammar and Punctuation'.

ciep.uk/training/choose-a-course/getting-to-grips-grammar-punctuation

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