How and When to Use *Who* and *Whom*

Confusing the pronouns *who* and *whom* is a common mistake. When speaking, people rarely use *whom* because it sounds awkward, and often, this informal tendency carries over to writing. However, since academic writing is more formal than everyday speech, learning how to correctly use *who* and *whom* is important.

The Rule: *Who* functions as a subject, while *whom* functions as an object.

Use *who* when the word is performing the action. Use *whom* when it is receiving the action.

> Kim is an athlete *who* enjoys distance running.

> Asher wrote a letter to a pen pal *whom* he had never met.

This rule can be especially confusing in two cases: beginning a question and introducing a dependent clause.

Beginning a Question:

If the question can be answered with a subject pronoun (he, she, it, or they), use *who* or *whoever*. If it can be answered with an objective pronoun (him, her, or them), use *whom* or *whomever*. For example:
> Q: Who is at the door?
> A: They are. [The sentence can only be answered with a subjective pronoun, such as "they."]
> Q: Whom did he tell?
> A: He told her. [The answer is in the objective case: "her" is the object of the verb "told."]

Introducing a Dependent Clause:

Within the clause alone (not the whole sentence), if the pronoun is a subject, then *who* is correct; if the pronoun is an object, then *whom* is proper. For example:

> Many people dislike the new chairman *whom* we have elected.
> [In the clause "whom we have elected," the pronoun *whom* is the object of the compound verb *have elected*. One would say, "We have elected him."]

> I am scared of the old woman who lives on Main Street.
> [In the clause "who lives on Main Street," the pronoun *who* is the subject. One would say, "She lives on Main Street."]

To learn how the usage of *whom* is evolving as a relative pronoun, see: www.khanacademy.org/humanities/grammar/parts-of-speech-the-pronoun/relative-pronouns/v/who-versus-whom-the-parts-of-speech-grammar

To learn how *whom* turns sweatpants into trousers, see: theoatmeal.com/comics/who_vs_whom