Who or whom?

(Also see Rules for Writers 7th ed. 223-226 or 8th ed. 227-30.)

The rule in grammarspeak:

1. Use *who* or *whoever* for the subject of a sentence or clause.
2. Use *whom* or *whomever* for any object—direct object, indirect object, object of preposition.

Comparison words:

1. Use *who* or *whoever* where you would use *I, we, he, she, they*.
2. Use *whom* or *whomever* where you would use *me, us, him, her, them*.

Some tests:

If you are asking a question, try imagining an answer. Revise the answer using a pronoun. Match your who/whom choice to the comparison word.

Examples:

Who/whom shall I say is calling?

Please say Joe Schmoe is calling. = Please say *he* is calling. Correct choice = *who*.

Is there someone who/whom can help me?

Jane Doe can help you. *She* can help you. Correct choice = *who*.

Is there someone who/whom I can help?

You can help Jane Doe. You can help *her*. Correct choice = *whom*.

If you’re not asking a question, you have an embedded clause: the who/whom problem is in an inner part of the sentence. Figure out what that inner chunk is and consider it in isolation. Substitute a comparison word and, as needed (usually), put the clause in normal word order.

Examples:

Show this pass to whoever/whomever is at the gate.

Extract inner chunk: whoever/whomever is at the gate
Substitute: Joe Schmoe is at the gate. *He* is at the gate.
Correct choice: whoever

The position should be filled by someone who/whom our clients will trust.

who/whom our clients will trust
Our clients will trust Jane Doe. Our clients will trust *her*. Whom.
The delegation met with the Prime Minister, who/whom they assumed was in a position to make decisions.

who/whom they assumed was in a position to make decisions

They assumed Richard Roe was in a position to make decisions.

They assumed he was in a position to make decisions.

Who.

You can get through a class reunion by saying "You look fantastic!" to whoever/whomever you don't remember.

whoever/whomever you don’t remember

You don’t remember Mary Smith. You don’t remember her. Whomever.

Whoever/whomever stole my car now owns a gas guzzler that breaks down every fifteen miles.

whoever/whomever stole my car

Pat Jones stole my car. He stole my car. Whoever.

Some friendly advice:

If you aren’t sure whether to use who or whom (or whoever or whomever), use the one without the m. (who, whoever)

Why? Languages change all the time. In contemporary American English, use of the oblique cases (grammarspeak for “with the m” in this case) is disappearing. That’s why this is hard in the first place: you don’t see and hear the “correct” forms as much as you would have even 20 years ago.

If you don’t use the m-forms at all, you just sound like you’re moving in that direction—wrong to a traditionalist or a stickler for correctness, but not out of step with common usage.

If you use the m-forms when they are incorrect, you’re not on the forefront of a trend; you’re just wrong. And to someone who does know the difference, it’s painfully obvious that you don’t—not the effect you want.

In other words, to someone familiar with the “correct” usage, a misused whom sounds much more glaringly ignorant than a misused who, so who is safer when you aren’t sure.