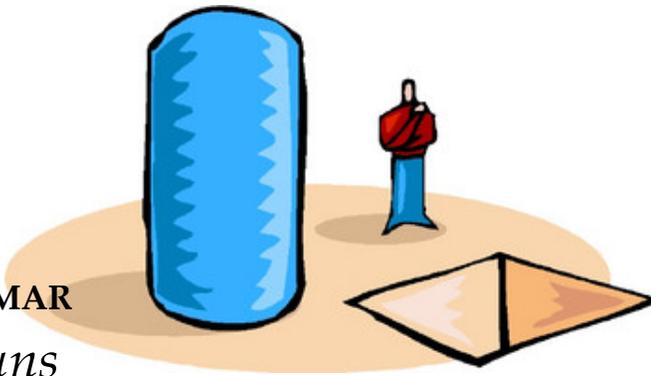


What If?

GRAPPLING WITH GRAMMAR

Problems with Pronouns



For small words, pronouns give big trouble. It's a rare occasion when no one finds fault with your pronoun usage or when you are 100% sure you've stuck the right one in the right place.

Just so we're clear, a pronoun is a substitute for a noun. Words such as 'he, she, it, I, we, they' are pronouns. It's difficult to cover all the rules governing pronouns, particularly since the rules are becoming more flexible. For our purposes, we'll talk about those that cause the greatest confusion.

WHO VS. WHOM

Here is one example where the rules seem to be slacking off. Unless you are writing a formal document or business letter you can usually get away with using 'who'. However, if your stuffy English professor insists on proper usage the easiest way to remember is that 'who' is normally performing an action, while 'whom' is having an action performed on it.

Example

The boys who threw stones at the dog were grounded by their parents.

The boys were performing an action of throwing stones.

When he sobered up, Billy could not remember whom he had yelled at the previous night.

In this instance Billy performed the action of talking and 'whom' was on the receiving end.

Another word of caution: 'Who' should be used in front of a preposition and 'whom' after.

Example

She is giving a gift to whom?

Who is she giving a gift to?

Same meaning and same words but note the position of the preposition 'to' and which word is used.

Final Note

Who's and whose are two completely different words. Who's is the short form for who is or who has. Whose is the possessive form of who. They are not interchangeable.

WHO VS. THAT

While we are discussing who, let's bring 'that' into the picture. The rule of thumb for the use of who or that boils down to whether you are discussing a person or a thing. If the pronoun refers to a person you can use either. If it is a thing, you must use that.

Example

There goes the lady who (or that) ran over my dog.

There goes the car that ran over my dog.

Simple enough, but what about Freddy's pet snake Ralph? Surely poor, old Ralph isn't a thing. Simple rule again: If you know an animal by name, use who. If not, use that.

Example

It was Ralph, Freddy's pet snake, who ate my sister's hamster.

That guy owns the snake that ate my sister's hamster.

THAT VS. WHICH

That or which is used to start a clause. A clause is a set of words inside a sentence containing its own subject or verb. Once again, the rules are simple. If the clause can be dropped and the rest of the sentence still makes sense, use which, if not, use that. A good way to identify a clause that can be dropped is if it is enclosed in commas.

Example

The plane Tim boarded in New York, which happened to be a 747, arrived safely in Toronto.

Take out the clause enclosed in commas and we still know the plane arrived safely.

The plane that Tim boarded in New York arrived safely in Toronto.

The point of both sentences is that Tom's plane made it safely from New York to Toronto. The 'that' clause in the second example helps make the point. The 'which' clause in the first example is disposable.

ME VS. I

This one really is embarrassingly simple but always gives people fits. The most likely reason is that we have been brought up to think of 'I' as more prim and proper than 'me'. The problem is that 'me' is correct a great deal of the time. The confusion normally comes from adding 'you and' to a sentence. In order to be sure which is correct, simply drop the 'you and'.

Example

The natural inclination would be to say, "*Grandma went to church with you and I,*" but if you take the 'you and' out you end up with, "*Grandma went to church with*

I." Therefore the original sentence should be, "Grandma went to church with you and me."

On the other hand, "You and I should take Grandma to church," is correct because if we drop the 'you and' we get, "I should take Grandma to church."

One last word on I versus me. You may be tempted to take the cowardly way out and use 'myself'. For example, you are debating between using I or me in the following sentence: "John and I (me) went for a swim. Rather than expend the brain-power to resolve the debate you stick 'myself' in. "Jack and myself went for a swim." This is a no-no.

The correct version is Jack and I. Myself, like herself, himself, yourself, itself and their plurals are only used for two reasons. The first is for emphasis: "I built that house myself." The second reason is to refer back to the subject of a sentence: "Billy scared himself."

THEIR VS. HE / SHE / HIS / HER / IT

The temptation is great (but must be resisted) to use 'their' after pronouns such as 'everyone/body, someone/body, anyone/body and no one/body'. Maybe you're not sure whether the 'somebody' is male or female so you stick 'their' in the sentence so your bases are covered. They may be covered but you still struck out.

Example

Everyone brought their CD's. Wrong!

Everyone brought his or her CD's. Right!

Maybe it sounds awkward so simplify...go with, "Everyone brought CD's."

Somebody lost their dog. Wrong!

Somebody lost his dog. Right!

Not to be chauvinistic but 'his' is an acceptable word when the subject's sex is unknown.

A final word on everybody and everyone...these words are singular. You wouldn't say, "*Are everybody here?*" It should be, "*Is everybody here?*" It may seem odd but everyone and everybody should be considered singular and the verb tense used with them is also singular.

An entire book could be written on pronouns and their place in the language but the odds are that we'd all be asleep before we got to the end. The English language is a living thing and as such grows and changes. Thee, thy and thou haven't been in use for a long time and the language is still functioning. Rules around pronouns seem to be the most flexible in the language but if you use those stated above you will at least be using proper English as it is in use today.