

Woe is I: The Grammarphobe's Guide to Better English in Plain English, 3rd Edition

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"Former New York Times Book Review editor and linguistic expert O'Connor...updates her bestselling guide to grammar, an invigorating and entertaining dissection of our ever-evolving language." - Publishers Weekly

In this new edition of *Woe Is I*, Patricia T. O'Connor unties the knottiest grammar tangles and displays the same lively humor that has charmed and enlightened grateful readers for years. With new chapters on spelling and punctuation, and fresh insights into the rights, wrongs, and maybes of English grammar and usage, *Woe Is I* offers down-to-earth explanations and plain-English solutions to the language mysteries that bedevil all of us. Patricia T. O'Connor, a former editor at the New York Times Book Review, has written for many magazines and newspapers. She is the author of two other books on language and writing, *Words Fail Me: What Everyone Who Writes Should Know About Writing and You Send Me: Getting It Right When You Write Online*.

Chapter 1

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Woe Is I

Therapy for Pronoun Anxiety

When a tiny word gives you a big headache, it's probably a pronoun.

Pronouns are usually small (I, me, he, she, it), but they're among the biggest troublemakers in the language. If you've ever been picked on by the pronoun police, don't despair. You're in good company. Hundreds of years after the first Ophelia cried "Woe is me," only a pedant would argue that Shakespeare should have written "Woe is I" or "Woe is unto me." (Never mind that the rules of English grammar weren't even formalized in Shakespeare's day.) The point is that no one is exempt from having their pronouns second-guessed.

Put simply, a pronoun is an understudy for a noun (a word for a person, place, or thing). He may stand in for "Ralph," she for "Alice," they for "the Kramdens," and it for "the stuffed piranha." Why do we need them? Take the following sentence: Ralph smuggled his stuffed piranha into the Kramdens' apartment, sneaked it out of his jacket, and was slipping it into his wife's curio cabinet, when suddenly Alice walked into their living room, clutched her heart, and screamed, "You get that out of my house!"

If no one had invented pronouns, here's how that sentence would look: Ralph smuggled Ralph's stuffed piranha into the Kramdens' apartment, sneaked the stuffed piranha out of Ralph's jacket, and was slipping the stuffed piranha into Ralph's wife's curio cabinet, when suddenly Alice walked into the Kramdens' living room, clutched Alice's heart, and screamed,

"Ralph, get the stuffed piranha out of Alice's house!"

See how much time pronouns save?

Simple substitutions (like his for Ralph's) are easy enough. Things get complicated when a pronoun, like any good understudy, takes on different guises, depending on the roles it plays in the sentence. Some pronouns are so well disguised that you may not be able to tell one from another. Enter that and which; it's and its; who's and whose; you're and your; who and whom; everybody and nobody; and their, they're, and theirs.

Now let's round up the usual suspects, as well as a few other shady characters.

The Which Trials: Which or That?

Bite on one of these: Buster's bulldog, [which or that] had one white ear, won best in show.

Pretty easy, right? The pause in the middle, set apart by commas, probably told you to choose which.

Now for a harder choice: The dog [which or that] won best in show was Buster's bulldog.

If you're confused, you've been spooked by whiches. In that sentence, according to modern grammarians, you can use either that or which. (Americans are more likely to use that than the British, but both are correct.)

The old that-versus-which problem haunts everybody sooner or later. Here are two hints to help you figure out whether a clause (a group of words with its own subject and verb) should start with that or which.

❓ If the clause is not essential (your sentence is okay without it), use which and commas.

❓ If the clause is essential (your sentence is pointless without it), use either that or which and no commas.

Why does it matter whether the information in the clause is essential or not? Because we naturally pause to introduce stuff that's merely an interruption and not necessary to the meaning of a sentence. We separate it from the rest with commas and a which. But we don't pause for essential information—it runs right into the sentence with no interrupting commas, and it can start with either which or that (the choice is yours).

Let's take another look at the correct versions of those sentences: Buster's bulldog, which had one white ear, won best in show. The dog which [or that] won best in show was Buster's bulldog.

The point of each sentence is that Buster's dog won. What happens when we remove the which or that clause?

In the first sentence, the clause (which had one white ear) is disposable-without it, we still have the gist of the sentence: Buster's bulldog won best in show.

But in the second sentence, the clause (which [or that] won best in show) is essential. Without it, the sentence is pointless: The dog was Buster's bulldog. The point you were trying to make-Buster's dog won!-is missing.

Now let's take sentences that look more alike. All the versions are correct, though their meanings aren't the same.

The dogs, which had baths, smell better now. (This means that all the dogs smell better because all of them had baths.)

The dogs which [or that] had baths smell better now. (This means that only the bathed dogs smell better.)

These next sentences also look alike, but the information-essential or not-comes at the end. Again, all the versions are correct, though their meanings aren't the same.

We threw out the bath towels, which were ruined. (We dumped all the towels-they were all ruined.)

We threw out the bath towels which [or that] were ruined. (We dumped only the ruined towels.)

When information is essential and not set apart by commas, many people prefer that to which. They may think that is less of an interruption, or they may think which is incorrect (it's not). If you normally use that in these cases, by all means keep using it. Just don't sneer at those who use which.

Which Craft

Sometimes we start a statement with which to make a comment on the previous sentence. Which is perfectly all right, if the ideas are connected.

Orson saw himself as larger than life. Which was true, after he gained all that weight.

But which is often used in casual conversation to introduce an afterthought that comes out of nowhere.

He was a great Othello. Which reminds me, where's that twenty dollars you borrowed?

Conversation is one thing and written English is another. When you write a sentence starting with which, make sure there's a connection. Which is a rule that bears repeating!

An Itsy-Bitsy Problem: It's or Its?

The smaller the word, the handier it is. And it is about as useful as they come. It can stand in for anything—a stuffed piranha, existentialism, the Monroe Doctrine, or buttered toast. It's a very versatile pronoun! But did you notice what just happened? We added an s and got it's-or should that be its? Hmmm. When do you use it's, and when do you use its?

This is a teeny-weeny problem that trips up even the smartest people. They go wrong when they assume that a word with an apostrophe must be a possessive, like Bertie's aunt. But an apostrophe can also stand for something that's been omitted (as in contractions, which are run-together words like can't and shouldn't). In this case, it's is short for it is. Plain its is the possessive form. So here's the one and only rule you need:

❓ If you can substitute it is, use it's.

NOTE: It's can also be short for it has. There's more on its versus it's in the chapter on possessives, pages 41-42.

Who's (or Whose) on First?

This problem is a first cousin of the one above (which you should look at, if you haven't already). As with it's and its, remember that who's is shorthand for who is, and unadorned whose is the possessive form.

❓ If you can substitute who is, use who's.

NOTE: Who's can also be short for who has. There's more on whose versus who's in the chapter on possessives, pages 42-43.

You're on Your Own

"Your our kind of people," reads the hotel marquee. Eek! Let's hope impressionable children aren't looking. The sign should read: "You're our kind of people." You're is short for you are; your is the possessive form.

❓ If you can substitute you are, use you're.

Who's That?

Choose one: The girl that married dear old Dad or The girl who married dear old Dad.

If both sound right, it's because both are right. Despite what many people think, a person can be either a that or a who. A thing, on the other hand, is always a that.

But what about Benji and Morris? Dogs and cats aren't people, but they aren't quite things, either. Is an animal a that or a who?

If the animal is anonymous, it's a that: There's the dog that won the Frisbee competition.

An animal with a name, however, can be a who or a that: Morris is a cat who knows what he likes.

There's more about the old that-versus-who myth on page 245.

Whom Sweet Whom

Poor whom! Over the years, wordsmiths from Noah Webster to Jacques Barzun have suggested that maybe we should ditch it altogether and let who do the job of both. Not a bad idea. It's pretty hard to imagine an outraged populace protesting, "Whom do you think you're messing with! Get your hands off our pronouns!" There's no doubt that in everyday speech and casual writing, whom has lost the battle.

So has the bell tolled for whom?

Not quite. Here we are, well into a new millennium, and against all odds, creaky old whom is still with us. With a few minor adjustments, we can do without it when we speak or write casually (I'll show you how on page 10). But anyone who wants to write formal English will have to get a grip on whom.

If you want to be absolutely correct, the most important thing to know is that who does something (it's a subject, like he), and whom has something done to it (it's an object, like him). You might even try mentally substituting he or him where who or whom should go: if him fits, you want whom (both end in m); if he fits, you want who (both end in a vowel). Who does something to (at, by, for, from, in, toward, upon, with, etc.) whom. The italicized words in parentheses, by the way, are prepositions—they "position" or situate words in relation to one another. A preposition often comes just before whom, but not always. A better way to decide between who and whom is to ask yourself who is doing what to whom.

This may take a little detective work. Miss Marple herself might have been stumped by the convolutions of some who or whom clauses (a clause, you'll recall, is a group of words with

its own subject and verb). For instance, other words may get in between the subject and the verb. Or the object may end up in front of both the subject and the verb. Here are two pointers to help clear up the mystery, followed by examples of how they're used.

❓ Simplify, simplify, simplify: strip the clause down to its basic subject, verb, and object.

❓ Move the words around mentally to make it easier to identify the subject and the object.

Nathan invited only guys [who or whom] he thought played for high stakes. If you strip the mystery clause of its false clues-the words separating the subject and verb-you end up with who . . . played for high stakes. Who did something (played for high stakes), so it's the subject.

Nathan wouldn't tell Miss Adelaide [who or whom] he invited to his crap game. First strip the sentence down to the mystery clause, [who or whom] he invited. If it's still unclear, rearrange the words in your mind: he invited whom. You can now see that whom is the object-he did something to (invited) whom-even though whom comes ahead of both the verb and the subject.

NOTE: A preposition isn't always followed by whom. It can be followed by a clause that starts with who. Consider this sentence: After the crap game, Nathan was confused about [who or whom] owed him money. Don't be misled by the preposition about; it's one of the false clues mentioned above. Instead, simplify, simplify, simplify, and look for the clause-in this case it's who owed him money. Since who did something (owed him money), it's the subject.

A Cure for the Whom-Sick

Now for the good news. In almost all cases, you can use who instead of whom in conversation or in informal writing-personal letters, casual memos, emails, and texts.

Sure, it's not a hundred percent correct, and I don't recommend using it on formal occasions, but who is certainly less stuffy, especially at the beginning of a sentence or a clause: Who's the letter from? Did I tell you who I saw at the movies? Who are you waiting to see? No matter who you invite, someone will be left out.

A note of caution: Who can sound grating if used for whom right after a preposition. You can get around this by putting who in front. From whom? becomes Who from? So when a colleague tells you he's going on a Caribbean cruise and you ask, "Who with?" he's more likely to question your discretion than your grammar. See also page 244.

Object Lessons

The Me Generation

These days, anyone who says "It is I" sounds like a stuffed shirt. It wasn't always so. In bygone days, you might have had your knuckles rapped for saying "It's me" instead of "It is I." Your crime? A pronoun following the verb to be, the English teacher insisted, should act like a subject (I, he, she, they) and not an object (me, him, her, them). But language is a living thing, always evolving, and It is I is just about extinct. In all but the most formal writing, even some of the fussiest grammarians accept It's me. Most of us find the old usage awkward, though I must admit that I still use "This is she" when someone asks for me on the phone. Old habits die harder than old rules.

Next time you identify the perp in a police lineup, feel free to point dramatically and say, "That's him, Officer!" For more, see page 244.

Just Between Me and I

Why is it that no one ever makes a mistake like this? You'll be hearing from I.

It's instinctive to use the correct form (from me) when only a solitary pronoun follows a preposition. (Prepositions-after, as, at, before, between, by, for, from, in, like, on, toward, upon, with, and a slew of others-position other words in the sentence.) But when the pronoun isn't alone, instinct goes down the drain, and grammar with it. So we run into misdemeanors like The odds were against you and I, although no one would dream of saying "against I."

I wouldn't be at all surprised to learn that the seeds of the I-versus-me problem are planted in early childhood. We're admonished to say, "I want a cookie," not "Me want a cookie." We begin to feel subconsciously that I is somehow more genteel than me, even in cases where me is the right choice-for instance, after a preposition. Trying too hard to be right, we end up being wrong. Hypercorrectness rears its ugly head.

Other Books

The Practical Researcher, This text offers updated online searching materials reviewed by reference librarians; updated sample references written in APA style; new material on learning to identifying the embedded outline found in published APA style papers as a way to learn to outline papers; additional discussion of diary studies, 'beeper' studies, and experience sampling methods. A new Preface and Acknowledgements is also included, as well as updated suggested references and at the end of each chapter.

Woe is I: The grammarphobe's guide to better English in plain English (3rd ed.). New York, NY : Riverhead Books . Avoid using gender - biased or sexist language . When psychologists write about human behavior , they must write ..."