

3 Restrictive *that/which* and non-restrictive *which*. Take two sentences or parts of sentences from Anita Brookner's *A Family Romance* (1993): *with the ball-point pen which my father had bought for me in a curiously shaped department store; This sharpness of gaze gave her an air of vanity, which I dare say was justified.* The first contains a restrictive clause led by *which*. In it *which* could have been replaced by *that* without change of meaning and without giving offence to any rule of syntax. The second contains a non-restrictive use of *which* preceded by a comma. In the first sentence the *which*-clause defines and particularizes; and *that* would have done the same work just as well. In the second example, the *which*-clause provides additional information as a kind of parenthetical aside. In other words it is a non-restrictive clause.

The division between the two types is not an absolute one. In 1926 Fowler wisely observed: 'The relations between *that*, *who*, and *which*, have come to us from our forefathers as an odd jumble, and plainly show that the language has not been neatly constructed by a master-builder who could create each part to do the exact work required of it, neither overlapped nor overlapping; far from that, its parts have had to grow as they could.' He went on to stress that not all writers observe the distinction between restrictive clauses (which he called *defining clauses*) and non-restrictive clauses (which he called *non-defining clauses*): 'The two kinds of relative clauses, to one of which *that* and to the other of which *which* is appropriate, are the defining and the non-defining; and if writers would agree to regard *that* as the defining relative pronoun, and *which* as the non-defining, there would be much gain both

in lucidity and in ease. Some there are who follow this principle now; but it would be idle to pretend that it is the practice either of most or of the best writers.'

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men and women, or even (though less frequently) to a group of girls or women.

**he**

**he as generic pronoun** Many writers of English have traditionally used the pronouns *he*, *him*, and *his* as generic or gender-neutral singular pronouns in formal writing, as in *A novelist should write about what he knows best* and *No one seems to take any pride in his work anymore*. However, whether *he* really refers to both genders or can be considered gender-neutral is questionable, since many people feel that it can only designate a male who is supposed to be taken as the representative member of the group referred to. When many occupations and public offices were held exclusively by men, using *he* in this way was unremarkable. For example, the sentence *Each member of Congress is answerable to his constituents* could raise no objections throughout most of U.S. history, as Congress was occupied exclusively by men, and there was scant possibility of women holding office. But the argument for the continued use of the so-called masculine generic in formal English gets more shaky every day, with women becoming more visible in all aspects of public life; instead the singular masculine pronouns now seem best used when referring to a group of men—and when used in this way they parallel the singular feminine pronouns.

Nonetheless, the use of the masculine pronoun as generic still has its advocates: in a series of sample sentences such as *A taxpayer who fails to disclose the source of \_\_\_\_\_ income can be prosecuted under the new law*, 37 percent of the Usage Panel completed the sentences with the masculine pronoun.

But if you don't like the traditional usage or feel it is sexist, you will want to avoid generic *he*.

*they with singular antecedent* The alternative to the masculine generic is the third-person plural pronoun. Recognized writers have used *they*, *them*, *themselves*, and *their* to refer to singular nouns such as *one*, *a person*, *an individual*, and *each* since the 1300s. For example, in 1759 the Earl of Chesterfield wrote, "If a person is born of a...gloomy temper...they cannot help it," and, echoing this sentiment, W. M. Thackeray wrote in *Vanity Fair* in 1848, "A person can't help their birth."

Modern writers of note, from George Bernard Shaw to Anne Morrow Lindbergh, have also used this construction, in sentences such as *To do a per-*

*son in means to kill them* and *When you love someone you do not love them all the time*. The practice is widespread and can be found in such mainstream publications as *Christian Science Monitor*, *The Washington Post*, *Discover*, and *Wall Street Journal*.

The use of the plural pronoun to refer to a singular noun or pronoun is hardly restricted to writing, however. Its use is so common in speech as to go without being noticed. And it is a favorite among advertisers, as in the slogan *In matters of taste, to each their own*.

When people shy away from using *they* to refer to a singular antecedent, it is usually out of respect for the traditional grammatical rule concerning pronoun agreement. Most of the Usage Panel rejects the use of *they* with singular antecedents as ungrammatical, even in informal speech. Eighty-two percent find the sentence *The typical student in the program takes about six years to complete their course work* unacceptable. Interestingly enough, panel members seem to make a distinction between singular nouns, such as *the typical student* and *a person*, and pronouns that are grammatically singular but semantically plural, such as *anyone*, *everyone*, and *no one*. Sixty-four percent of panel members accept the sentence *No one is willing to work for those wages anymore, are they?* in informal speech. Many writers might now consider this too fine a distinction—rejecting *they* for singular nouns but allowing it for singular pronouns that are plural in meaning—perhaps because they feel it will be missed by readers, who might merely think that the writer is being inconsistent.

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who; whom. A. Generally. Edward Sapir, the philosopher of language, prophesied that "within a couple of hundred years from to-day not even the most learned jurist will be saying 'Whom did you see?' By that time the *whom* will be as delightfully archaic as the Elizabethan *his* for *its*. No logical or historical argument will avail to save this hapless *whom*." *Language* 156–57 (1921; repr. 1949). A safer bet might be that no one will be spelling *to-day* with a hyphen. In any event, writers in the late 20th and early 21st centuries ought to understand how the words *who* and *whom* are correctly used.

*Who*, the nominative pronoun, is used (1) as the subject of a verb <it was Kate who rescued the dog>; and (2) as the complement of a linking verb, i.e., as a predicate nominative <they know who you are>. *Whom*, the objective pronoun, is used (1) as the object of a verb <whom did you see?>; and (2) as the object of a preposition <the person to whom we're indebted>.

It's true that in certain contexts, *whom* is stilted. That has long been so: "Every sensible English speaker on both sides of the Atlantic says *Who were you talking to?* [—not *Whom*—] and the sooner we begin to write it the better." J.Y.T. Greig, *Breaking Priscian's Head* 23 ([n.d.—ca. 1930]). But there are other constructions in which *whom* remains strong—and more so in AmE than in BrE. Although writers have announced the demise of *whom*, it persists in AmE—e.g.:

- "Even if things do come down to *whom* you know in this world, luck definitely figures in *whom* you meet." Jaclyn Fierman, "What's Luck Got to Do with It?" *Fortune*, 16 Oct. 1995, at 149, 150.
- "Susan McDonough's classroom is filled with primary-school children of different ages, all of *whom* are lagging behind in reading skills." Ann O'Hanlon, "A New Take on an Old Problem," *Wash. Post*, 28 Sept. 1997, at V1.

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**B. *Between you and I.*** Some people learn a thing or two about pronoun cases, but little more. They learn, for example, that it is incorrect to say "It is me" or "Me and Jane are going to school now." (See **it is I.**) But this knowledge puts them on tenterhooks: through the logical fallacy known as "hasty generalization," they come to fear that something is amiss with the word *me*—that perhaps it's safer to stick to *I*. They therefore start using *I* even when the objective case is called for: "She had the biggest surprise for Blair and I [read *me*]."/ "Please won't you keep this between you and I [read *me*]." These are gross linguistic gaffes, but it is perennially surprising how many otherwise educated speakers commit them. See **between (C) & PRONOUNS (B).**

Many writers and speakers try to avoid the problem by resorting to *myself*, but that is hardly an improvement. See **myself.**

GARNER

USAGE PANEL QUESTION

The phrase *between you and I* is often heard, even from otherwise literate speakers. Do you accept this in casual speech?

Yes: 3%. No: 97%.

In writing Yes: 2%. No: 98%.

ISAAC ASIMOV: "Moon Mullins says it constantly."

W. H. AUDEN: "Horrible!"

SHERIDAN BAKER: "I wince and grind my remaining teeth."

JOHN A. BARBOUR: "Yes—but don't let it get around."

STEWART BEACH: "It makes me shudder when I hear it, and it accomplishes nothing for the language."

BARRY BINGHAM, SR.: "It is no easier to say than 'between you and me' and serves no purpose whatever."

HAL BORLAND: "Pretentious—as well as sloppy English."

JOSEPH A. BRANDT: "No, no, never!"

HEYWOOD HALE BROWN: "WHY!"

ANTHONY BURGESS: "Not yet. Only when 'give it to I' is also used."

BEN LUCIEN BURMAN: "Dreadful!"

BE BURROWS: "Ever since the arguments about 'It's me' versus 'It is I,' millions of people think that 'me,' 'him,' 'her,' 'them,' etc., are all incorrect at all times. I accept 'it's me' just as the French say 'c'est moi.' But, when the objective is called for, I want it to be there."

GEORGE CORNISH: "One has to make a stand somewhere. If not against this phrase, then where?"

SYDNEY J. HARRIS: "Dreadful illiteracy!"

GEOFFREY HELLMAN: "Yes. This is an upperclass affectation. Maybe lower class too, but I don't know the lower classes."

PAUL HORGAN: "Never heard a literate person use it."

JOHN K. HUTCHENS: "Never!"

HELEN L. KAUFMANN: "Only in jest, or in quotes."

PINCKNEY KEEL: "'You and me' *sounds* better."

WALT KELLY: "No. That is, I don't use it. Not wishing to start fights, I'll accept *anything* in casual speech."

ALEXANDER KENDRICK: "Never."

CLARK KINNAIRD: "Politeness may require acceptance, but I don't believe it."

IRVING KOLODIN: "Probably. But not pridefully."

they are careless.

People who correctly say they “*couldn't* care less” are emphasizing that they don't care *at all* and therefore could not possibly care any less than they do. But people who mistakenly say “*could* care less” are unintentionally saying they really *do* care, because they are saying that they could care *less* than they do.

*The Columbia Guide to Standard American English* says the *could care less* usage invites “the scorn of logic lovers and cliché haters alike.” *Line by Line*, the Modern Language Association's editing manual, observes, “It is true that idioms are not necessarily logical, but since both the logical and the illogical versions [of this expression] are idiomatic, why not make sense?” Even the generally permissive *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of English Usage* emphasizes that “most writers, faced with putting the words on paper, choose the clearer *couldn't care less*.”

Merriam-Webster researchers say it is “plausible” that *couldn't care less* was brought to the United States by GIs returning from World War II, and that, at any rate, “it was clearly established by the late 1950's and early 1960's.” The *could care less* version appears to have emerged, first in speech and then print, in the late 60's. By 1975, *could care less* had attracted so much attention that the *Harper Dictionary of Contemporary Usage* denounced it as “an ignorant debasement of the language.”

Risky usage: *The New York Times* (2/15/2004) quoted the author of *A Dog's History of America*, Mark Derr, as observing that dog-show dogs “could care less about the ribbon and trophy.”

Risk-free usage, from an opinion essay in the *Los Angeles Times* (5/5/2000): “the media giants could not care less about the public.”

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*could care less* or *couldn't care less*? The many people who say they *could care less* when they mean they *couldn't care less* are risking the accusation that they are careless.

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