

# Interrogative Pronouns

We are all curious beings. We want to know more about ourselves, the world, and everything in between. We seek answers to our questions, and we learn from them. Questions are essential for communication, understanding, and discovery. They are the tools that we use to explore, inquire, and challenge.

But how do we ask questions in language? How do we express our curiosity and interest clearly and effectively? One of the key elements that we need to master is the use of "**interrogative pronouns**".

These are the words that help us form questions and request information. They are the building blocks of our inquiries and investigations.

In this lesson, we will learn about the meaning, types, and usage of interrogative pronouns in English. We will also look at some examples and practice exercises to help us improve our language skills.

By the end of this lesson, we will be able to craft better questions and communicate more confidently with interrogative pronouns.

## Definition and Purpose

Interrogative pronouns are pronouns that are used to ask questions. A pronoun is a word that takes the place of a noun or a noun phrase.

Interrogative pronouns are special because they do not refer to a specific person, thing, or idea. Instead, **they indicate the kind of information that we want to know.**

For example, if we ask:

**Who** is the president of France?

We do not know the answer yet. The word "**who**" is an interrogative pronoun that shows that we are looking for the name of a person.

Interrogative pronouns are also different from other pronouns because they usually do not have an antecedent. An antecedent is a word or phrase that a pronoun refers to.

In the question "**Who is the president of France?**", there is no antecedent for "**who**". The interrogative pronoun stands on its own and does not depend on another word.

The main purpose of interrogative pronouns is to introduce questions and request information. They help us create "**wh-questions**", which are questions that start with a **wh-word**, such as **who, what, where, when, why, and how**.

Wh-questions are also called "**open-ended questions**" because they can have many possible answers.

For example, if we ask:

**What** is your favorite color?

The answer can vary depending on the person.

## Features of Interrogative Pronouns

Interrogative pronouns are a subset of pronouns with some distinctive features that set them apart from other types of pronouns.

Here are some of the characteristics of interrogative pronouns:

- Interrogative pronouns are used to ask questions and request information. They are not used to make statements or assertions.
- Interrogative pronouns usually do not have an antecedent. They stand on their own and do not refer to another word or phrase.
- Interrogative pronouns are usually placed at the beginning of a sentence or a clause. They introduce wh-questions or open-ended questions that can have many possible answers.
- Interrogative pronouns can act as the subject or the object of a sentence or a clause. They can also act as the complement of a verb or a preposition. The role of the interrogative pronoun affects the word order and the syntax of the question.
- Interrogative pronouns can have different forms depending on the number, person, case, and gender of the noun they replace. Some interrogative pronouns have the same form as other types of pronouns, such as relative pronouns. The context and the meaning of the sentence help us distinguish between them.

# Main Interrogative Pronouns

There are five main interrogative pronouns in English: **who**, **whom**, **what**, **which**, and **whose**. Each of these pronouns has a different meaning and usage. Let us look at each of them in detail.

## Who

The interrogative pronoun "**who**" is used to ask questions about the identity or the role of a person or a group of people. It can replace a noun or a noun phrase that refers to a human being.

For example, if we want to know the name of the author of a book, we can ask:

**Who** wrote this book?

The pronoun "**Who**" can act as a subject of the sentence. It enquires about the doer of the action. This subject is necessarily human.

When the pronoun "**who**" acts as a subject, it replaces the noun or the noun phrase that performs the action or the state of being in the sentence.

For example, if we want to know the name of the person or the group of people who won the lottery, we can ask:

**Who** won the lottery?

Here are some more examples of questions with who as a subject:

- **Who** is the president of France?
- **Who** are your best friends?

- **Who** invented the telephone?
- **Who** sings this song?
- **Who** knows the answer?

These examples show that the use of "**Who**" is intended to identify who is doing the action of the verb. This subject, the doer of action, must necessarily be a person.

## **Whom**

The interrogative pronoun "**whom**" is also used to ask questions about the identity or the role of a person or a group of people.

However, unlike "**who**", the pronoun "**Whom**" acts as an object. It replaces the noun or the noun phrase that **receives the action** or the state of being in the sentence.

For example, if we want to know the name of the person or the group of people that the teacher praised, we can also ask:

**Whom** did the teacher praise?

Here are some more examples of questions with "**whom**":

- **Whom** are you going to marry?
- **Whom** should I contact for more information?
- **Whom** did they accuse of the crime?
- **Whom** do you admire the most?
- **Whom** did you vote for in the election?

## What

The interrogative pronoun "**what**" is used to ask questions about the identity, nature, or quality of a thing or an idea. It can replace a noun or a noun phrase that refers to a non-human entity.

For example, if we want to know the name of the device that we use to make phone calls, we can ask:

**What** is this?

"**What**" can act as a **subject**, an **object**, or a complement of a verb or a preposition, depending on the role of the thing or the idea in the question.

### Exploring Questions About Things

When "**what**" is used to explore questions about things, it replaces the noun or the noun phrase that denotes a concrete or abstract object.

For example, if we want to know the name of the musical instrument that produces sound by blowing air through a reed, we can ask:

**What** is a saxophone?

Here are some more examples of questions with "**what**" as a **subject**, an **object**, or a complement of a verb or a preposition:

- **What** is your favorite movie? Subject
- **What** do you want for dinner? Object
- **What** are you afraid of? Object
- **What** is the capital of Morocco? Subject
- **What** did you buy at the market? Subject

## Which

The interrogative pronoun "**which**" is used to ask questions about the identity, nature, or quality of a thing or an idea **among a limited or specified set of options**. It can replace a noun or a noun phrase that refers to a non-human entity.

For example, if we want to know the name of the planet that is the fourth from the sun, we can ask:

**Which** is the fourth planet from the sun?

"**Which**" can act as a subject, an object, or a complement of a verb or a preposition, depending on the role of the thing or the idea in the question.

## Navigating Choices and Options

When "**which**" is used to navigate choices and options, it replaces the noun or the noun phrase that denotes a concrete or abstract object among a limited or specified set of alternatives.

For example, if we want to know the quickest way to a destination, we can ask:

**Which** is the quickest way to the airport?

Here are some more examples of questions with "**which**" acting as a subject pronoun, an object pronoun, or a complement of a verb or a preposition:

- **Which** is your favorite book? I like "**The Great Gatsby**" the most. **Object**
- **Which** is the best way to learn a new language? **Practicing** is the best way. **Subject**
- **Which** do you prefer, tea or coffee? I prefer tea. **Object**

- **Which** of these movies have you seen? I have seen the Titanic. **Object**

These examples show that the pronoun "**Which**" is used to ask questions about objects or things that can be the subject of the verb or object.

## **Whose**

The interrogative pronoun "**whose**" is used to ask questions about the possession or ownership of a thing or an idea. It can replace a noun or a noun phrase that refers to a human or a non-human entity.

For example, if we want to know the name of the person or the group of people that owns a car, we can ask:

**Whose** is this car?

"**Whose**" can act as a subject, an object, or a complement of a verb or a preposition, depending on the role of the thing or the idea in the question.

## **Posing Questions About Possession**

When "**whose**" is used to pose questions about possession, it replaces the noun or the noun phrase that denotes a concrete or abstract object that belongs to someone or something.

In this case, "**whose**" is followed by a noun or a noun phrase that specifies the thing or the idea that is possessed.

For example, if we want to know the name of the person or the group of people that has a certain book, we can ask:

**Whose** is this book?



Here are some more examples of questions with whose:

- There's one car missing. **Whose** hasn't arrived?
- Your phone is broken. **Whose** did you borrow?
- We've found everyone's keys. **Whose** did you find?
- You heard plenty of ideas. **Whose** seems relevant?
- There's one book missing. **Whose** hasn't been returned?
- Your laptop is not working. **Whose** did you use?
- We've collected everyone's assignments. **Whose** did you grade?
- You tasted many dishes. **Whose** was the best?
- You received several emails. **Whose** have you replied to?

### Interchangeability with Other Pronouns

When "**whose**" is used in questions, it can sometimes be interchanged with other pronouns, such as **who**, **what**, or **which**. This depends on the level of specificity, the context, and the preference of the speaker or the writer.

For example, if we want to know the name of the person or the group of people that owns a car, we can also ask:

**Who** owns this car?

**What** is the name of the owner of this car?

**Which** person or group owns this car?

### Who vs. Whom: Navigating Formality

One of the most common and confusing dilemmas in using interrogative pronouns is the choice between "**who**" and "**whom**".

In this section, we will explore the formal usage of "**whom**", the modern trends and informal language, and some practical insights into usage.

## Formal Usage of "Whom"

"**Whom**" is the objective case of "**who**", which means it is used when the interrogative pronoun is the object of the verb or the preposition. For example:

- To **whom** did you send the letter? (object of the preposition "**to**")
- **Whom** did you see at the party? (object of the verb "**see**")
- **Whom** are you talking about? (object of the preposition "**about**")
- **Whom** do you love? (object of the verb "**love**")
- **Whom** should I call? (object of the verb "**call**")
- **Whom** did they elect? (object of the verb "**elect**")

"**Whom**" is often considered to be too formal, archaic, or grammatically complex for modern and informal language. Therefore, many speakers and writers prefer to use "**who**" instead of "**whom**", regardless of the grammatical role of the interrogative pronoun. For example:

- **Who** did you send the letter to?
- **Who** did you see at the party?
- **Who** are you talking about?
- **Who** do you love?
- **Who** should I call?
- **Who** did they elect?

The choice between "**who**" and "**whom**" depends on the level of formality, the purpose of communication, and the preference of the speaker or writer.

Here are some practical insights into usage:

- Use "**whom**" when you want to sound formal, polite, or academic. For example, in a business letter, a job interview, a research paper, etc.
- Use "**who**" when you want to sound informal, casual, or conversational. For example, in a text message, a chat with a friend, a blog post, etc.
- Use "**whom**" when you are sure about the grammatical role of the interrogative pronoun and the word order of the sentence.
- Use "**who**" when you are unsure about the grammatical role of the interrogative pronoun and the word order of the sentence.
- Use "**whom**" when you want to emphasize the object of the verb or the preposition. For example, when you want to stress the identity, importance, or relevance of the person or thing you are asking about.

## Practice Exercises

Here are some practice exercises for you to master the usage of interrogative pronouns in various contexts.

Try to fill in the blanks with the correct interrogative pronoun, and check your answers at the end of this section.

1. Q: \_\_\_\_ are you going to invite to your party?  
a. A: I am going to invite my friends and family.
2. Q: \_\_\_\_ did she say when you told her the news?  
a. A: She said she was very happy for me.
3. Q: \_\_\_\_ of these movies do you want to watch?

- a. A: I want to watch the comedy one.
- 4. Q: \_\_\_\_\_ is responsible for this mess?
  - a. A: He is responsible for this mess.
- 5. Q: \_\_\_\_\_ do you think will win the election?
  - a. A: I think he will win the election.
- 6. Q: \_\_\_\_\_ are you looking for in a partner?
  - a. A: I am looking for someone who is kind, honest, and funny.
- 7. Q: With \_\_\_\_\_ did they go on their vacation?
  - a. A: They went alone on their vacation.
- 8. Q: \_\_\_\_\_ makes you so angry with me?
  - a. A: I am so angry with you because you lied to me.
- 9. Q: \_\_\_\_\_ knows how to play the guitar?
  - a. A: I know how to play the guitar.
- 10. Q: \_\_\_\_\_ is that man over there?
  - a. A: That man over there is my boss.

Answers:

- 1. Whom
- 2. What
- 3. Which
- 4. Who
- 5. Who
- 6. What
- 7. Whom
- 8. What
- 9. Who
- 10. Who

Rewrite the sentences using the formal structure of wh-questions with whom.

- a. Who did you talk to on the phone?
- b. Who are you waiting for?
- c. Who did they invite to the party?

- d. Who are you working with?
- e. Who did you borrow the book from?
- f. Who did she marry?

Answers:

- a. To whom did you talk on the phone?
- b. For whom are you waiting?
- c. Whom did they invite to the party?
- d. With whom are you working?
- e. From whom did you borrow the book?
- f. Whom did she marry?

Write a sentence using an interrogative pronoun as the subject or the object of the sentence.

- Who is the president of the United States? (subject)
- I don't know what to say. (object)
- Which one do you prefer? (subject)
- They asked whom I wanted to meet. (object)
- Whose book is on the table? (subject)