

## Nominative vs. Objective Noun Case

**Noun case** refers to the grammatical role a noun is playing in a sentence. While there are multiple noun cases in English, understanding the difference between the nominative noun case and the objective noun case will prove especially beneficial to your writing because it helps explain why we use certain pronouns in certain contexts (e.g., he vs. him, we vs. us, who vs. whom).

### What are Nominative Case and Objective Case?

A noun in the **nominative case** is serving as the **subject** of the sentence, the entity (person, thing, etc.) that is performing the action of the verb. Example:

**The dog chased the cat.** (here, “dog” is the subject and is said to be in the nominative case)

Conversely, a noun in the **objective case** is serving as the **object** of the sentence, the entity (person, thing, etc.) that is receiving the action of the verb. Example:

**The dog chased the cat.** (here, “cat” is the object and is said to be in the objective case)

### What about Pronouns?

Things get more complicated when a pronoun, rather than a noun, is serving as the subject or object of a sentence. A **pronoun** is a word that stands in for a noun. For example, instead of writing, “Dr. Green,” I could write, “he” or “him.” But which one should I use? It depends on whether the pronoun is in the nominative or objective case!

We often use different pronouns depending on whether the pronoun is serving as the subject (nominative case) or the object (objective case). Examples:

<u>Nominative</u>	<u>Objective</u>
I	Me
He	Him
She	Her
We	Us
They	Them

For example, we would use “I” when we want to write about the subject (e.g., **I went to the park.**), but we would use “me” when we want to write about the object (e.g., **My sister called me.**).

Here’s another example: we would use “they” when writing about the subject (e.g., **They ate dinner.**), but we would use “them” when writing about the object (e.g., **Chris invited them to dinner.**).

Nominative vs. objective case also explains when we use the pronouns “who” or “whom.” “Who” is used for the nominative case; “whom” is used for the objective case. Examples:

**Who called me just now?** (“who” is acting as the subject, so it is in the nominative case)

**Whom should I call?** (“whom” is acting as the object, so it is in the objective case)

However, it can often be tricky to tell whether “who”/“whom” is substituting for a subject or an object, especially when we have questions, where the syntax (order of the words) is changed. One strategy is to rewrite the question into a declarative statement and see whether you’re left needing a subject or an object. For example, I could rewrite “Whom should I call?” as “**I should call \_\_\_\_.**” In that form, it’s easier to tell that I want an OBJECT in the blank; therefore, I want “whom.”

## Pronouns and Compounds/Series

It can sometimes be difficult to tell which noun case to use when a pronoun is part of a compound or series, in which there are multiple items serving the same grammatical function (see our resource on **Parallel Structure**). Example:

**Sam and (I/me) went to the movies.**

Should we use the nominative “I” or the objective “me” in the blank? Well, keep in mind that both items in a compound are serving the same grammatical function—in this case, the subject. Therefore, we want the nominative case, “I.”

**Sam and I went to the movies.**

Here’s another example, this time with a compound object:

**Nancy said they invited the president and (she/her).**

Do we want the nominative “she” or the objective “her”? Since both “president” and the pronoun in question are objects in this sentence, we want the objective case: “her.”

**Nancy said they invited the president and her.**

Note: A useful tip for determining whether to use the nominative or objective case is to take the other item(s) out of the compound or series and see which word makes sense. So, for example, if I take “the president” out of the above sentence, I’m left with **Nancy said they invited (she/her)**. Now, it’s easier to tell that “her” makes more sense here.

## Objects of Prepositions

Questions of which noun case to use often arise in situations where we have an object of a preposition. To explain what an object of a preposition is, let’s first define prepositional phrase. A **prepositional phrase** is a grammatical unit that consists of a preposition and a noun, an object, that comes after it. Examples:

**My grandmother lives over the hill.** (the preposition is “over”; “the hill” is the object of the preposition)

**She put her books in her locker.** (the preposition is “in”; “her locker” is the object of the preposition)

**Our class meets after lunch.** (the preposition is “after”; “lunch” is the object of the preposition)

Unfortunately, it would be impossible to list every preposition here. But a general rule of thumb is that prepositions often indicate location (in, on, under, above), time (before, after, during), or direction (to, toward, behind).

Now, we know that objects should be in the objective case. Well, the same is true for objects of prepositions, even when they are pronouns! Examples:

**I went after him.** (“him” is the object of the preposition “after”)

**There were storm clouds gathering over us.** (“us” is the object of the preposition “over”)

**We all ran toward them.** (“them” is the object of the preposition “toward”)

So, objects of prepositions will always be in the objective case. The same is true even when we have a compound object of a preposition. Examples:

**Between you and me, this class is awesome.** (“you” and “me” are both objects of the preposition “between”)

**We will present before Nadia and her.** (“Nadia” and “her” are both objects of the preposition “before”)

This resource was prepared by the Cottey College Writing Center.

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