

Case (for researchers)

Skilled writers understand grammatical case. Today's casual writers, particularly after the advent of digital texting and social media, seldom master enough grammar to employ case consistently and correctly. Many practiced writers honestly don't seem to understand case either; they certainly don't take care to get it right. The concept is not difficult; we should work to master it and use it correctly in our formal writing.

Defined simply, grammatical case is that property of a noun or pronoun that indicates its relation to other words in the sentence. Case is identified by the function of the noun or pronoun: does it function as a subject, an object, or is it in the possessive form?

The Three Cases

- Subject case (previously identified as the subjective case and prior to that the nominative case). All nouns and pronouns that function as subjects within sentences or clauses are in the subject case.
- Object case (previously identified as the objective case). All nouns and pronouns that function as direct objects, indirect objects, object complements, or objects of prepositions or objects within verbal phrases are in the object case.
- Possessive case. Generally, the possessive case is straightforward. Nouns in the possessive case are marked with apostrophes. Pronouns decline into possessive forms (such as *her, his, theirs, ours, its*—note the lack of apostrophes).



English language nouns are no longer declined for subject or object case (once, long ago, they were). You identify the case of a noun by identifying its use within a sentence. In the following example, nouns and pronouns are highlighted in red; verbs are highlighted in green:

The bog iron furnaces and forges (of South Jersey) made a racket [when they were operational].

Words in Subject Case:

- Together furnaces and forges are the subject of the action verb made and are thus in the subject case.
- They is the subject of the linking verb were and is thus in the subject case.

Words in Object Case:

- South Jersey is the object of the preposition “of” in the prepositional phrase “of South Jersey” and is thus in the object case.
- Racket is the direct object of the verb made and is thus in the object case.

Words in Possessive Case: none



Sentences are made up of word units—units of meaning. Think of these as building blocks (below from least complexity to greatest):

- Words
- Phrases
- Clauses

Words are easy enough.

A **phrase** is a group of words; these words have a grammatical relationship with one another and, together, they function as a unit. *Phrases do not have both subject and verb.*

Clauses are the most complex building blocks of sentences. There are two types: independent clauses, which can stand alone as a sentence, and dependent clauses, which cannot stand alone. *Every clause will have at least one subject and verb.*

The trick to understanding case is to be able to identify phrases and clauses within a sentence. Once identified, the function of a noun or pronoun within its phrase or clause determines its case.



In the examples below, prepositional phrases, one type of phrase, are marked with parentheses. Dependent clauses, either subordinate or relative, are marked by square brackets. Remember, at the basic level, a prepositional phrase will not have subject and verb; clauses must have both.

Nouns and pronouns that are in the subject case below are marked with a rust color; nouns and pronouns in the object case are marked in blue. Remember, the verbs are in green.

[Because they lived far (from urban centers)], Pineys developed their own jargon.

The colliers, [who sweated (in the heat) (of the coal pits) [that they tended (by themselves)]], were a dirty crew.



WHERE MOST OF THE DIFFICULTY LIES

The case of nouns presents no trouble. It is the case of pronouns (which *do* decline) which we need to identify and, if necessary, correct. Misuse of *who/whom* and *I/me* are two especially pernicious examples. Consider the following examples, which are correct:

The museum curator, [who was beloved (by visitors)], chatted blithely (about early twentieth-century attitudes) (toward Pineys).

“(Between you and me), I do believe [that the citizens (of East Jersey) wanted to maintain the isolation* (of the populace) (of the Pines).”

*isolation is the object of the infinitive “to maintain”

“[Whoever spoke (about their usefulness) (as citizens)] would have been ostracized.”

That same curator [whom visitors loved]** also liked to discuss the writing conventions* (of exhibition blurbs).

**Relative clauses, like this one, are often placed out of normal S + V + DO order. This example, DO + S + V, is common.

FINALLY, THE WORKSHEET

In the sentences below dependent clauses are marked with square brackets; prepositional phrases are marked with parentheses. Choose the correct case as dictated by the grammatical function of the pronoun in question.

Remember, case is dictated by the function of nouns or pronouns in their most immediate grammatical structure—its function within a phrase or its function within a clause.

The clammer, [who/whom enjoyed rainy days], sat (between his wife and I/me) [as Billy rowed slowly downriver].

[If it were (up to I/me)], I/me would ask you two to walk away.

The historian, [who/whom explained the events of the past [as though he lived they/them]], smiled [as he remembered].

That same historian, [who/whom the board members hired], asked for changes (from I/me).

The historian told my sister and I/me [that reading books for fun is, well, fun].



ANOTHER THING

Several grammatical functions call for use of the object case: objects of prepositions, direct objects, indirect objects, object complements, objects of phrases other than prepositional.

Of course all subjects are in the subject case, but there is a special situation—when a linking verb makes use of a predicate noun—that also calls for the subject case:

Sally is president
Joe was the class clown.
The Beatles were a band.

Sally, Joe and Beatles are the subjects above; president, clown, and band are the predicate nouns (also named subject complements). All six of these words are in the subject case.

Thus, the following sentences are correct:

The band leader is she.
Yes, this is he.
It is I.

Fun, right?

A FINAL ADMONITION

Great confusion exists between the possessive pronoun “its” and the contraction, “it’s,” the latter being a shortened or contracted form of “it is.” It is important to know the difference and to watch for this common mistake while revising your writing.