



**waive / waiver / wave / waver**

**Waive** means “to not demand something you are entitled to” or “not cause (a rule) to be enforced.”

❑ Ah, take the Cash in hand and **waive** the Rest.—Edward Fitzgerald

**Waiver** (or **waivers**) is the act or document that gives up a right, privilege, or claim; it also means “to place (a ball player) on waivers” or “to release after placing on waivers.”

❑ At some point, every player in baseball is put on **waivers**.—Joe Bick

Meanings for the verb **wave** include:

- To motion with the hands in signal.
- Flutter.
- To move in waves; heave.
- To become moved back and forth; brandish or flourish.
- To move with a wavelike motion.
- Undulate.

Meanings for the noun **wave** include:

- The act of signal by a movement of the hand.
- One of a series of ridges that moves across the surface of a liquid (especially across a body of water).
- Something that rises rapidly and dies away.
- A shape or outline having successive curves.
- A movement like that of the ocean.
- Curves and undulations in the hair.
- A progressive disturbance propagated without displacement of the medium itself.

❑ There is hopeful symbolism in the fact that flags do not **wave** in a vacuum.—Arthur C. Clarke

The verb **waver** means “to sway to and fro” or “to pause in uncertainty or hold back in unwillingness.”

❑ Grief teaches the steadiest minds to **waver**.—Sophocles

### wan / wane / wax

**Wan** (rhymes with *John*), as an adjective means “unnaturally pale, as from physical or emotional distress; suggestive or indicative of weariness, illness or melancholy; dim, barely perceptible; ineffectual.”

- ❑ While the angels, all pallid and **wan**,  
Uprising, unveiling, affirm  
That the play is the tragedy “Man”,  
And its hero the Conqueror Worm.—Edgar Allan Poe

[We do not know if Poe pronounced *wan* to rhyme with *man* or *man* to rhyme with *wan*.]

**Wane** (pronounced as *Wayne*) means “to decrease, dwindle.”

- ❑ A savage place! as holy and enchanted  
As e'er beneath a **waning** moon was haunted  
By woman wailing for her demon-lover!—Samuel Taylor Coleridge

**Wax** (in the context of the phrase “wax and wane,” not “what bees produce” or “to polish”) means the opposite of *wane*: “to grow gradually larger; to increase in strength or size.”

- ❑ Mankind, let us hope, will dwindle and die more contented than it ever  
was when it **waxed** and struggled—George Santayana

Both **wax** and **wane** are most often used to refer to the fullness of the moon, but they can and do appear in statements such as these: *His anger waxed strong and then subsided. My enthusiasm for your plan is beginning to wane.*

- ❑ Nothing that is can pause or stay;  
The moon will **wax**, the moon will **wane**,  
The mist and cloud will turn to rain,  
The rain to mist and cloud again,  
To-morrow be today. —Henry Wadsworth Longfellow



### wander / wonder

**Wander** (among other meanings) means “to travel aimlessly.”

- ❑ Not all who **wander** are lost.—J.R.R. Tolkien

**Wonder** (among other meanings) means “to consider or question some issue.”

- ❑ Sometimes I **wonder** if men and women really suit each other.  
—Katharine Hepburn



## weak / week

**Weak** means “lacking strength, power, force” (and has other meanings).

- ❑ The **weak** are more likely to make the strong **weak** than the strong are likely to make the **weak** strong.—Marlene Dietrich

A **week** is a period of seven days.

- ❑ A **week** is a long time in politics.—Harold Wilson

❑

## wean

**Wean** means:

- in the literal sense, to accustom young mammals to gain nourishment from sources other than nursing
- in the figurative, to detach from a source of dependence, to accustom anyone to leaving an old set of circumstances or conditions
- There is an odd, relatively new figurative sense meaning “to be raised and nourished on” as in *students weaned on the computer*. (Although used earlier, this was not commonly seen in print until the 1970s.) The justification of this last usage is that the process of weaning involves a substitution of some other form of nourishment: accustoming someone from one thing to another. Thus the phrase *students weaned on the computer* suggests the students’ exposure to computers began almost as soon as they stopped nursing.

We don’t care who finds this to be acceptable hyperbole, we reject it. Yes, in some instances this figurative use *does* make sense. When Alice Roosevelt Longworth said Calvin Coolidge “looks as if he had been weaned on a pickle” she was referring to a face that looked like that of a child being accustomed to a sour, strange new food.” When Helen Hayes said she was “was *weaned* on grease-paint” she was accustomed to greasepaint at an extremely early age. In 1932, when a humorist wrote of babies “being *weaned* on aspirin to fortify them for the economic headaches they will certainly face,” it was meant in the same sense as Helen Hayes later used it. But when Frank Sinatra said, in 1954, “I was *weaned* on the best popular music ever written,” he probably meant “raised on,” not “accustomed to.” We feel using the phrase “weaned on” as synonymous with “raised on” is unacceptable. These examples, taken from the Web, should have used *raised* rather than *weaned*:

- ❑ A generation **weaned on** the legitimacy of black protest...
- ❑ There is a generation of computer users throughout the world that have been **weaned on** the Internet...

- ❑ [Rhythm guitarist] John worked at and was **weaned on** all the Merseybeat clubs in Liverpool...
- ❑ Gen Y, **weaned on** the technology Gen X discovered, is a market to be reckoned with.
- ❑ Some **weaned on** Star Trek might imagine other Earth-like planets with beings going about their daily lives...
- ❑ It refers to musicians **weaned on** punk...
- ❑ We were **weaned on** the “duck and cover” method of atomic weaponry survival...

Using *weaned on* in these two examples, is probably acceptable:

- ❑ Think nightmarish Dickensian street urchins **weaned on** methamphetamine and hell-bent on chaos...
- ❑ [V]astly increasing the emotional resonance for an audience **weaned on** the Bard...

However, if you mean “raised on,” we suggest you use that phrase rather than “weaned on.”



## weather / whether

**Weather** (primarily) refers to climate.

- ❑ You don't need a **weather** man to know which way the wind blows.  
—Bob Dylan

**Whether** is a conjunction that precedes the first of two choices.

- ❑ Morning comes **whether** you set the alarm or not.—Ursula K. LeGuin



## while / whilst

In British English these are interchangeable, with **whilst** probably considered the more formal. Although *whilst* pops up in American English, **while** is the most commonly used by far. In the U.S. you probably risk sounding somewhat pretentious using it.

- ❑ **While** I thought that I was learning how to live, I have been learning how to die.—Leonardo da Vinci
- ❑ It is not necessary that **whilst** I live I live happily; but it is necessary that so long as I live I should live honourably.—Immanuel Kant



## whiskey / whisky

- ❑ Tell me what brand of **whiskey** that Grant drinks. I would like to send a barrel of it to my other generals—Abraham Lincoln
- ❑ Logic, like **whisky**, loses its beneficial effect when taken in too large quantities.—Lord Dunsany

The original Gaelic name for the strong alcoholic distillate made from a fermented mash of grain was **usquebaug**, **uisgebaugh**, **using beatha**, **uisgebeatha**, **uisce beatha**, **uisge beatha**, or, well, you get the idea. Whether we spell it **whiskey** or **whisky** in English we're better off than trying the Gaelic. The Gaelic name was derived from the Latin *aqua vitae* or "water of life." (Scandinavian countries have *aquavit*, vodka started as *zbizennia voda*, some brandies or ports are called *eau-de-vie*—they all mean "water of life.") In the 18th century the Gaelic term somehow became **usky**, then *whiskey* or *whisky*.

Distinctions, at least in the U.S. (in England and Canada it's all **whisky**), in the two spellings evidently arose early in the 20th century and have not always been consistently used since then.

True **Scotch whisky**—capital *S*, lowercase *w*, and no *e* in *whisky*—is distilled in Scotland from barley that has been warmed with burning peat bricks. (This helps give it an intense smoky flavor.) Any other similar beverage made elsewhere is **whiskey** with an *e*. When referring to scotch in general it is **scotch** with a lowercase *s*.

- ❑ For her fifth wedding, the bride [Barbara Hutton ] wore black and carried a **scotch** and soda.—Phyllis Battelle



## whither / wither

**Whither** is an adverb meaning "to what place" or "to what point, conclusion, or end."

- ❑ **Whither** goest thou, America, in thy shiny car in the night?  
—Jack Kerouac

**Wither** means "to become dry and sapless; to shrivel from or as if from loss of moisture." By extension it means "to lose vitality, force, or freshness."

- ❑ Age cannot **wither** her, nor custom stale Her infinite variety.  
—William Shakespeare



**who / whom**

Most every guide to the use of **who** and **whom** will tell you it is “simple” to sort out. It is—for some people. Those familiar with German or Latin are used to dealing with case forms like *accusative* and *dative*. They probably consider *who/whom* to be simple. For those of us who have trouble dealing with English alone, the prevalent meaning of “case forms” has something to do with a document with spaces in which to write. “Simply” explaining *Who is used for the subjective case, whereas whom is used for the objective case* doesn’t fill any blanks in most of our brains.

The problem is that few of us grew up spontaneously using *whom*. Using *whom* now requires mental effort. Expending effort of any sort is not generally favored by most of us, especially writers. Some hope the linguists who claim that *whom* is “dying out” are correct and that, with a little patience, the issue can be avoided altogether. Get real. *Whom* has been officially dying now since at least 1870. The word has yet to start singing its last act aria as far as we can tell.

In daily speech and informal writing, you can use *who* most of the time. We feel that even informally, however, we should all remember to at least use *whom* after a preposition—even if people think you are strange. In formal writing you will occasionally need to use *whom*, so here are some tips.

*Who* is the subjective form of the pronoun (like *he/she/they*). *Whom* is the objective form (the direct or indirect object—like *him/her/them*). *Who* is used when it is the subject of the sentence and *whom* is used when it is the object.

**Who** went to the party last night?  
(**Who** is the subject of the sentence.)

That blonde **who** dated Jason was there.  
(**Who** stands for the subject of *dated Jason*.)

**Who** do you think is going Friday?  
(**Who** stands for the subject of *is going Friday*)

Jason forgot to **whom** he sent invitations.  
(**Whom** is the object of the preposition *to*.)

Surely that blonde **whom** we all thought was a bimbo will not show up.  
(**Whom** is the object of the verb *thought*.)

Problems begin to arise with sentences like: *Whom do you want to call?* *Whom* is the object of *call*, so this sentence is correct. It doesn’t seem “right” to us because we are used to sentences beginning with subjects rather than objects. Most people would say *Who do you want to call?* In every usage but the most formal, this colloquial exchange of *who* and *whom* is now fairly well accepted.

Another problem: With a sentence like *I saw the man whom Anna had tried to get Jennifer to date last summer*—we have to exert that mental effort and think far enough ahead to know that *whom* will be the object of the verb *date* (which is a couple of clauses away). If you were writing it you'd at least have a chance to sort it out, but chances are you aren't going to say *whom*, even if it is correct.

When in doubt, try substituting the pronoun (*he/him or she/her*) for *who/whom*. If *he* or *she* is correct, then use *who*; if it's *him* or *her*, then use *whom*. This can be easy:

**Who/Who** called the cops?

*He called the cops. (he=who; so—)*

**Correct: Who** called the cops?

It can involve some word-juggling:

Jason is the dude with **who/whom** I went clubbing with last week.

*I went clubbing with him. (him=whom; so—)*

**Correct:** Jason is the dude **whom** I went clubbing with last week.

This sentence's subject is separated from its subject by a clause:

The guy standing over there (**who/whom**) is not someone I know called the police.

*The guy ... called the police.=He called the police. (he=who; so—)*

**Correct:** The guy standing over there **who** is not someone I know called the police

Chances are you can think of a dozen ways to avoid constructing sentences as graceless as those last two examples and avoid the *who/whom* decision altogether.

❑ The man **who** is a pessimist before 48 knows too much; if he is an optimist after it, he knows too little.—Mark Twain

❑ Those **whom** God wishes to destroy, he first makes mad.—Euripides

**Note:** The rules governing the use of **who** and **whom** apply equally to **whoever** and **whomever** and are ignored just as often in speech and informal writing.



## who's / whose

**Who's** is a contraction of the phrase **who is** or the phrase **who has**.

❑ The enemy is anybody **who's** going to get you killed, no matter which side he's on.—Joseph Heller

**Whose** is the possessive form of **who**.

❑ Never eat at a place called "Moms." Never sleep with a woman **whose** troubles are worse than your own.—William Penn



## widow / widower

When a man dies, his wife becomes a *widow*; when a woman dies, her husband becomes a *widower*. In obituaries, a man is *survived by his wife* or his *widow*, but a woman is *survived by her husband*, not her *widower*. We don't know why. Either *the wife of the late Mr. Dahlby* or *the widow of Mr. Dahlby* is correct, but *the widow of the late Mr. Smith* is redundant and, therefore, incorrect. People who remarry are no longer *widows* or *widowers*. Former spouses are not *widows* or *widowers*.

- ❑ Memory, in **widow's** weeds, with naked feet stands on a tombstone.  
—Sir Aubrey de Vere
- ❑ Whoever marries the spirit of this age will find himself a **widower** in the next.—William Ralph Inge



## wreath / wreathe

**Wreath** [*ree*-(with the) *th* (voiced)] is a noun meaning “something intertwined into a circular shape.”

- ❑ She wore a **wreath** of roses  
The first night that we met.—Thomas Haynes Bayly

**Wreathe** [*ree*-(with the) *th* (unvoiced)] is a verb meaning “envelop, surround, or encircle.”

- ❑ LAUREL, n. The *laurus*, a vegetable dedicated to Apollo, and formerly defoliated to **wreathe** the brows of victors and such poets as had influence at court.—Ambrose Bierce

