Case Closed...or Confusing?
A Quick Guide to the Three Cases

Is anything wrong with these sentences?

Pardon, sir, but that is mine ukulele.
I gave the fluffy gorilla slippers to she.
"Me want cookie." -- Cookie Monster

Well? In each sentence, at least one word doesn't sound right. Can you tell which? Sure.

Pardon, sir, but that is my ukulele.
I gave the fluffy gorilla slippers to her.
"I want cookie." -- a more educated Cookie Monster

(Actually, our blue friend should really say, "I want a cookie," but that's for another day.)

Probably you could have fixed those sentences easily. But here's a tougher problem: do you know why they needed fixing? Or do you only know that they sounded wrong before and now they sound right? Sometimes we only think we know something until someone asks us to explain it. Fortunately, the underlying concepts are fairly simple. They won't always be a mystery, but they'll always have a case.

A case is a special form of a word that shows what the word is doing in that particular sentence.

English has three cases—nominate, possessive, and objective. (Already confused? Count your blessings. Other languages have more.) The same word will take a different case depending on the sentence. Basically:

If a word is the subject, it takes the nominative case.
If a word is possessive, it takes the (you guessed it) possessive case.
If a word is an object, then yes, it takes the objective case.

Naturally, it's more complicated than that, but there's a simple overview. What is it mean to "take a case"? Ah, Fatson, all in good time.
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Exercise A: An Ear for Cases

1. How's your ear for grammar? Even if you can't tell a subject from an object or possessives from progressives, see if you can fix these sentences simply by how they sound.

   a. He never told she he wanted to be a chef.

   b. Well, it was her kite, and her always did want to fly.

   c. Darren donated the old spaceship to Gordy and I.

   d. Maxwell wanted him own coffee, but I said we had to share.

2. So far, we've explained the cases using words like subject, possessive, and object. This isn't much good unless you know what those words mean. Here's a basic review.

   Generally, the subject is the doer in the sentence.  
   A possessive shows possession (ownership).  
   Generally, the object receives the action (verb) of the subject.

   For each sentence below, write whether the bold word is a subject, possessive, or object.

   a. Fuzzy barked, chased the cat, and then did his own special dance.

   b. Fuzzy barked, chased the cat, and then did his own special dance.

   c. Fuzzy barked, chased the cat, and then did his own special dance.

   d. Fuzzy barked, chased the cat, and then did his own special dance.
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The Nominative Case: A Pleasant Subject

In the last unit, each sentence had a word which had to change. Did we change the word's meaning? No.

Me want a cookie. I want a cookie.

What does me mean? A grammarian would define me as "first person singular." "First person" means "the one who is speaking," and "singular" means there's only one speaker. Now, what does I mean? First person singular—the same thing.

So why does "Me want a cookie" sound like a blue monster, but "I want a cookie" sound normal? The two words have the same meaning but a different case. Each word can only do a specific job in a sentence. If your first person noun is the subject, it takes (or "is in") the nominative case, so you use I. If your first person noun is the object, it takes the objective case, so you use me.

I want a cookie. Give me that cookie!

Earlier, we said a subject is generally the doer in a sentence. As you've probably learned elsewhere, there are other ways a word can be a subject.

The Invisible Verb

I want that cookie as much as he.

Sounds weird, perhaps a little dramatic, but nothing's actually wrong. You might be tempted to say, "as much as him," but him is in the objective case. The last word needs to be in the nominative case because it's the subject of a verb that we assume is there. Watch, try finishing the sentence.

I want that cookie as much as he does.

See? You wouldn't want to say "as much as him does." Of course, the easy way to avoid this problem is to speak your verbs like a common mortal.

Appositive

The two of us, Frederico and I, decided to have a chat.

The subject is two. I repeats that subject (I'm one of the two), so it's a special word called an appositive. An appositive takes the case of the word it refers to. Here, both Frederico and I are appositives in the nominative case.

The Linking Verb: To Be

Craig will be a tax man. Grita was the princess. It is I.

Each bold word is in the same case as the subject—the nominative. Unlike a normal verb, which expresses action, to be expresses being. Grita wasn't doing anything to the princess; she was the princess. Grita and the princess were the same person. So they're in the same case.
Exercise B: **Pick Your Pronoun**

Notice how we've focused on pronouns. In English, *pronouns* change with the case, but *nouns* often don't.

- **Bob** wants a cookie.  
  Give **Bob** that cookie!  

  **Bob** (nominative case.)  
  **Bob** object (objective case).

Nice and simple. Like our small number of cases, this is an English thing. Other languages use endings all over the place so you know exactly which case every noun is in. Hey, don't shudder like that. It works for them, and it probably makes it easier to rhyme poetry.

Here are the pronouns you use for the nominative case:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pronouns: <strong>NOMINATIVE</strong> case</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>he, she, it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>who, whoever</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Circle each pronoun that's in the nominative case. Careful! Sometimes the same word can be used for different cases. You can only be sure it's in the nominative case by analyzing what it's doing in the sentence.

   a. Sholmes and I inspected the bakery, but at first we found nothing.
   b. Then he snatched a pie and smashed it into my face.
   c. "Sholmes!" I cried. "Has this accursed place bewitched you?"
   d. "My apologies, Fatson," he said. "You seemed drowsy."

2. Correct each sentence.

   a. Maxwell wanted him own coffee, but I said we had to share.

   b. "It is true," me said.

   c. If us students want better lunches, they should serve better food.
III. **Possessive: Get Off My Case!**

Although it’s usually pronouns that change, not nouns, there’s one exception—the possessive case.

That’s not Bob’s cookie!

In general, putting a noun in the possessive case is easy.

| If a noun does **not** **end in s**, add ‘s.       | dog    | dog’s   |
| If a **proper** noun **ends in s** and has **one** syllable, add ‘s. | Jess   | Jess’s  |
| Otherwise, if a noun **ends in s**, add an **apostrophe only.** | dogs   | dogs’   |
|                                                   | Phyllis | Phyllis’ |

As with the nominative case, there’s a whole set of pronouns for the possessive case.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pronouns: <strong>POSSESSIVE case</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Possessives</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>my our</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>your</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>his, her, its</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>whose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Independent Possessives</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>your</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>their</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>whose</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The function of a possessive is (usually) to describe a noun. (A possessive can also modify a gerund, but that’s another beast altogether.)

An independent possessive, however, functions as a noun. It’s a nominal—it isn’t actually a noun, but it plays one on TV. Therefore it’s "independent." It can do noun work all on its own.

Confused? Look at the lists of pronouns again. The two groups do seem rather similar. But try them in sentences, and you’ll hear the difference.

Please give me mine passport. Please give me my passport.

See? We say "my passport" because my describes the noun passport. We say, "Mine is ugly," because mine stands alone as the subject of the sentence. Like most of your grammar, you probably knew what sounded right. But maybe you’ve heard a foreigner use mine incorrectly. ("Where is mine shoes?") This is another of the countless unspoken rules you had to absorb in order to speak English. If English is your first language, you got most of them before you were five. Amazing what you learn without realizing, isn't it?
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Exercise C: Independent Possessives, Clingy Possessives

1. Circle each pronoun that we’ve studied in this unit. Above it, write N if it’s in the nominative case, P if it’s a possessive and IP if it’s an independent possessive. Remember, an IP does the work of a noun, but it’s always in the possessive case.
   a. "Well, my drowsiness is quite gone," I said, wiping pie from my face.
   b. "As I had planned," said Sholmes. "But hark, we have company."
   c. "I say, Sholmes," I said, "Is that man pointing a gun in our direction?"
   d. "Quite possibly." Sholmes was grim. His hand leapt to another pie.
   e. "You don’t propose to rely on the pie for defense?" I hissed.
   f. Then the man croaked from the darkness. "Drop that pie. It’s mine."

2. Correct each sentence.
   a. Jake thought us guys should fish in mine uncle’s lake.
      ___________________________________________________________
   b. Us all have sweaters, but his is the only one your can bear to look at.
      ___________________________________________________________
   c. Her is an extraordinarily ugly shade of pea green, like my.
      ___________________________________________________________
   d. Ours plan is to make them into an art exhibit.
      ___________________________________________________________
   e. "Suffering In Sweaters" is mine suggested title, but us'll see.
      ___________________________________________________________

3. For each pronoun below, if it’s a possessive, write its corresponding independent possessive that is the same person, number, and gender. If it’s an independent possessive, write its corresponding possessive. If it could be either, simply write it again.
   a. her __________________
   b. mine __________________
   c. their __________________
   d. its __________________
   e. our __________________
   f. yours __________________
IV. Objective: The Case for the Accused!

As we said earlier, a noun or pronoun in the **objective** case generally **receives** the action of the verb. For some reason, you can also call this the **accusative** case, which sounds more vigorous but is also a bit negative.

As in the nominative case, nouns (in English) don’t change for the objective case. As always, pronouns do.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pronouns: <strong>OBJECTIVE</strong> case</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>him, her, it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>whom, whomever</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are several ways to wind up in the objective case. Here are some:

**Object**

Gary stole **her**.

Whom did Gary steal? **Her**. The direct object of the **verb** is **her**.

Gary stole her from **me**.

From whom? **Me**. The object of the **preposition** is **me**.

She was my hamster, but Gary didn’t give **me** one cent.

Gary didn’t give it to whom? **Me**. The indirect object of the **verb** is **me**.

Stealing **her** was a very Gary thing to do.

Stealing whom? **Her**. The object of the **verbal**, "stealing her," is **her**. A verbal is a verb that has no subject and is thus freed up to do funky things. This verbal is a **gerund**, so it functions as a noun.

**Appositive**

Gary has wanted Zuzu, my **hamster**, ever since I taught her to skate.

**Hamster** repeats **Zuzu**, so it’s an **appositive**. Since the appositive takes the case of the word it repeats, **hamster** is in the objective case.

**The Invisible Verb**

But I know Zuzu likes me much more than **him**.

What’s **him**? It’s the object of an invisible verb. The sentence implies, “much more than **she** likes **him**.” If you’re ever stumped, see if there’s an invisible verb.
Exercise D: Your Honor, I Object!

1. Circle each pronoun that’s in the **objective** case. (Some sentences may not have one.)
   a. “Won't you drop that pie, Sholmes?” I whispered. “He rather likes it.”
   b. “Fatson, I believe I've instructed you not to obey criminals.”
   c. “Criminal!” cried the man. “Call me names, will you? It's my pie!”
   e. “The Earl!” I gasped. “I thought he wanted us to find his Ruby Pig!”
   f. “Precisely.” Sholmes raised the pie. “Let us see what waits within.”
   g. “Don't drop it!” cried the man. “Stop him! It’s for my wife's birthday!”

2. Correct each sentence...if it needs it. Only change pronouns.
   a. Mud is good. I especially like it wet.
   b. Dry mud is more like dirt. In fact, it is dirt. Don't mix they up.
   c. My friend Flax says he eats mud. Its helps his digest.
   d. He told my that I should try it too, but I told he no. That’s gross.
   e. Why? Because mud is only for drinking. Try it. It grows on your.

3. For each pronoun below, if it's an objective pronoun, write it again. If not, write the objective pronoun that is the same person, number, and gender.
   a. it __________________ e. its ______________________________
   b. I __________________ f. your ______________________________
   c. whose __________________ g. he ______________________________
   d. hers __________________ h. them ______________________________

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V: Just in Case: A Few Last Tips

Most of the time, you can use cases without thinking. It either sounds right or it doesn’t. But in some sticky sentences it’s easy to goof, and your friends (or at least your teacher, maybe) will definitely notice.

Your or You’re? Its or It’s?

This is your pile of watermelons? Then you’re the one who’s been sneaking them into the gym! It’s hard enough keeping this gym clean without its floor being buried under hundreds of pounds of fruit!

These mixups can only happen in writing. Your is a possessive, you’re is a contraction for you are. (An apostrophe can only form a possessive with s.) Similarly, its is the possessive, it’s is a contraction for it is. (Like the possessives his, hers, ours, and theirs, the possessive its has no apostrophe.)

Who or Whom?

Who said that? Of whom are you afraid?

Ugh. This is a big one. Thanks to the magic of questions in English, either who or whom can appear anywhere in the sentence. If the pronoun is in the nominative case, use who or whoever. If it’s in the objective case, use whom or whomever. Sometimes it helps to rephrase the question as a sentence (even if it sounds weird).

Who said that. Of whom you are afraid.

In the first sentence, who is the subject, since he’s doing the talking. In the second, whom is the object of the preposition of. Although it sounds natural to say, “Who are you afraid of?” it’s not correct. Granted, no one seems to follow this rule, but it makes sense. We have these two pronouns, so let’s use them well. Besides, it’s gratifying to get whom right. Sounds elegant.

Except it’s only elegant in the right place. Occasionally, you meet someone who likes whom so much he pops it in every chance he gets.

Whom is at the door? Who is at the door?
Whom ate my cookies? Who ate my cookies?

Neither use of whom works. In both sentences, the word in question is the subject and you need the nominative who.

I or Me?

Bob and I ate too many cookies.
I wish that nice old lady hadn’t given all eighteen boxes to Bob and me.

Same as who and whom. I is nominative, me objective. As with whom, be careful to use I properly. The second sentence might sound more refined if you ended with “to Bob and I,” but alas, it would be wrong.
Exercise E: Resting Your Case

1. Circle each pronoun we've studied in this unit. Label it N for nominative, P for possessive, IP for independent possessive, and O for objective.
   a. “Sholmes, wait,” I said. “Perhaps the lady could eat her pie first.”
   b. “And choke on the Ruby Pig? It seems a harsh way to punish her.”
   c. “There's no pig in my pie!” the man said.
   d. “There won't be now,” said Sholmes. He smashed the pie on the floor.
   e. The man shrieked, threw up his arms, and wept.
   f. “Sholmes,” I said, “the error may be mine, but I don't see the Pig.”
   g. Sholmes cleared his throat. “Sir, you did say your name was Higgins?”
   h. “I never said so! My name is Hoggins! Hoggins Bakery! Hoggins!”
   j. “Fatson,” I said.
   k. “Please,” said Sholmes. “Names are my strong point.”

2. Correct each sentence...if it needs it. Only change pronouns.
   a. The frog refused to talk to Bob and I.

   b. We weren’t sure whom it was afraid of, but my guess was Bob.

   c. If your going to catch a frog, it's your job not to look scary.

   d. But Bob kept flapping him arms like a bird. Some birds eat frogs.

   e. (It's a dumb hobby at the best of times, flapping he arms like that.)

   f. No wonder the poor frog was afraid to open it's mouth.
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Name: _____________________________________________________

Case Closed...or Confusing? Answer Key:

Exercise A

1. a. He never told her he wanted to be a chef.
   b. Well, it was her kite, and she always did want to fly.
   c. Darren donated the old spaceship to Gordy and me.
   d. Maxwell wanted his own coffee, but I said we had to share.

2. a. subject
   b. object
   c. possessive
   d. object

Exercise B

1. a. I, we
   b. he [it is objective here; my is possessive]
   c. I [you is objective here]
   d. he, You

2. a. Maxwell wanted his own coffee, but I said we had to share.
   b. "It is true," I said.
   c. If we students want better lunches, they should serve better food.

Exercise C

1. a. my (P); I (N); my (P)
   b. I (N); we (N)
   c. I(N); I (N); our (P)
   d. His (P)
   e. You (N); I (N)
   f. mine (IP)

2. a. Jake thought we guys should fish in my uncle's lake.
   b. We all have sweaters, but his is the only one you can bear to look at.
   c. Hers is an extraordinarily ugly shade of pea green, like mine.
   d. Our plan is to make them into an art exhibit.
   e. "Suffering In Sweaters" is my suggested title, but we'll see.

3. a. hers
   b. my
   c. theirs
   d. its
   e. ours
   f. your
Exercise D

1. a. it e. us
   b. you f. us
   c. me g. it, him
   d. none [it is the subject]
2. a. no correction needed
   b. Don't mix them up.
   c. It helps him digest.
   d. He told me that I should try it too, but I told him no.
   e. It grows on you.
3. a. it e. it
   b. me f. you
   c. whom g. him
   d. her h. them

Exercise E

1. a. I (N); her (P)
   b. It (N); her (O)
   c. my (P)
   d. He (N)
   e. his (P)
   f. I (N); mine (IP), I (N)
   g. his (P); you (N); your (P)
   h. I (N); My (P)
   i. I (N); your (P); us (O)
   j. I (N)
   k. my (P)
2. a. The frog refused to talk to Bob and me.
   b. no correction needed [whom is object of preposition of]
   c. If you’re going to catch a frog, it’s your job not to look scary.
   d. But Bob kept flapping his arms like a bird. Some birds eat frogs.
   e. (It’s a dumb hobby at the best of times, flapping his arms like that.)
   f. No wonder the poor frog was afraid to open its mouth.