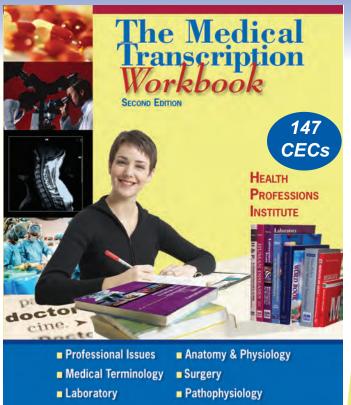
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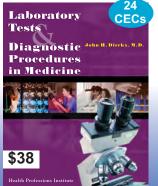
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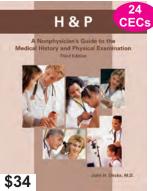
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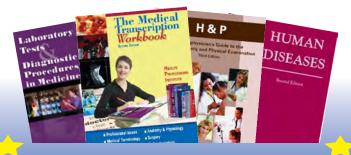


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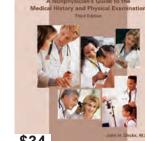
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# Looking at Language

## World's Toughest Grammar Test

#### by Richard Lederer, Ph.D.

oday I'm proud to pose four of the most difficult grammar questions I can possibly conjure up. Try thy best to choose wisely before consulting the explanations that follow. If thou gettest all four right, I shall knight thee Conan the Grammarian.

- 1. Which is correct?
  - a. Wisdom comes to whoever seeks it.
  - b. Wisdom comes to whomever seeks it.

In just about every statement you speak and write, each verb must have a subject, expressed or understood. In the sentences above "wisdom" is the subject of "comes"—and "who(m)ever" is the subject of "seeks." Because subjects are cast in the nominative case, the subject of "seeks" must be "whoever."

But, you ask, doesn't the preposition "to" take an object? Yes, it does. The object turns out to be not "whomever," but the entire noun clause, "whoever seeks it."

If that seems bizarre, have a look at another sentence: "I know who did it." Here the object of the verb "know" is "who did it," and the subject of the verb "did" is "who." Few of us would speak or write, "I know whom did it."

- 2. Which is correct?
  - a. A wave of technological innovations is crashing on the shore of our culture.
  - b. A wave of technological innovations are crashing on the shore of our culture.

Certain nouns are singular in form but may be either singular or plural in concept. Among them are "couple," "faculty," "family," "group," "staff," "majority," "team," "jury," "total," "number" and "committee." Such words are called collectives. The question often arises whether to treat a collective as singular or plural -- in other words, which verb form to use with it.

Most of the time (in the U.S., but not in Britain), collectives are expressed as singular, but, as with many grammatical questions, function rather than form is the more important consideration. Simply stated, this means that what the writer has in mind should be the controlling factor. If the idea of oneness prevails, treat the noun as singular. If the idea of more-than-oneness predominates, treat the noun (and hence the verb) as plural: "The couple is marrying"; "The couple are divorcing." In the quiz sentence, "wave" connotes a titanic unity. Hence. "A wave of technological innovations is crashing on the shore of our culture."

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- 3. Which is correct?
  - a. She is one of the drab homebodies who reads *McCall's*.
  - b. She is one of the drab homebodies who read *McCall's*.

Several years ago *McCall's* magazine published an advertisement with a headline describing an attractive young woman as "One of the drab homebodies who reads '*McCall's*.'" The ad elicited a flood of letters from readers who supported or objected to the singular verb "reads."

The headline as printed was wrong. The relative pronoun "who" must agree with its antecedent, in this case, "homebodies," which is plural. Hence, the verb must be plural, as in choice (b). A useful device in these "one of those who" constructions is to reverse the order of the sentence: "Of those drab homebodies who read *McCall's* she is one."

- 4. Which is correct?
  - a. All she ever wears is dresses.
  - b. All she ever wears are dresses.

This kind of construction puzzles many people, but there is an answer: The subject of the sentence is "all," which is a singular pronoun even though what it represents (dresses) is plural. "Dresses" is a predicate nominative or, as it is sometimes called, the subject complement. Since the subject, not the complement, controls the verb form and "all" is singular, the construction requires the singular verb "is." Hence, the first sentence is the correct one. A good reminder is the novelty song "All I Want for Christmas Is My Two Front Teeth."

Similarly, when "what" is the subject of a sentence, it is treated as singular even though the "what" being discussed is plural: "What I like most about summertime is fresh vegetables."

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Richard Lederer, Ph.D., is the author of more than 3,000 books and articles about language and humor. His syndicated column, "Looking at Language," appears in newspapers and magazines throughout the United States. His new title, *Comma Sense: A Fun-damental Guide to Punctuation*, with John Shore, is now available from St. Martin's Press. E-mail: richard. lederer@pobox.com/

