



Me, Myself and I: How To Talk About Yourself

Even savvy writers can wander astray when navigating pronoun usage. We especially struggle when we talk about ourselves and choose among the nominative case, the objective case, and reflexive pronouns. Add multiple pronouns to the sentence, and the opportunities for missteps multiply. Other times, we overcorrect to avoid what we mistakenly believe to be errors. (We probably harbor these beliefs based on ingrained misunderstandings of the instructions we received in elementary school.) And some people, trying to sound more formal, instead blunder into a grammar no-man’s land.

Let’s try an experiment. Choose the correct sentence from among the following:

1. Keep this conversation between you and I.
2. Please send any responses to my paralegal and I.
3. Please call Maria, Jerome, or myself if you have any questions.

I confess: That was a trick. None of the options is correct. Why?

Nominative vs. objective case

Examples #1 and #2 illustrate mistakes in choosing between the nominative and objective cases.

I, we, you, he, she, it, they, and *who* are nominative-case pronouns. A nominative-case pronoun serves as the subject of a sentence.¹ Objective-case pronouns, on the other hand, including *me, us, you, him, her, it, them,* and *whom,* serve as the object of a verb or preposition.

Between is a preposition. After a preposition, you use the objective case (*me*), not the nominative case (*I*). But when a preposition has more than one object, many people make the mistake illustrated in #1 and #2 and hypercorrect, using the nominative-case pronoun *I* instead of the objective-case pronoun *me* after the preposition.

But why? Probably many of us were traumatized as youths by being shamed for saying things like “Marti and me went for a run this morning” instead of “Marti and I went for a run this morning,” and the wrong lesson stuck with us. Instead of recognizing the distinction—in those examples, *Marti* and *I* are the subjects of the sentence, not the objects of a preposition—we absorbed the incorrect “rule” that *and me* always represents poor grammar. Thus, we erroneously “correct” the sentence to “between you and I.” Just remember this: Never use *I* right after a pronoun. You wouldn’t write “he sent the check to I,” so don’t write “he mailed the check to my partner and I.”



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Reflexive pronouns

Example #3 illustrates another common error: misusing reflexive pronouns. *Myself* is a reflexive pronoun, not a more formal substitute for *I* or *me*. Other reflexive pronouns include *himself, herself, itself, ourselves,* and *themselves*. Generally, you only use a reflexive pronoun when the object and the subject of a sentence are the same. For example:

- I really embarrassed myself with that punctuation error!
- The defendant chose to represent herself.

By contrast, in #3, the subject and object of the sentence are

not the same, so using *myself* is incorrect.

Reflexive pronouns are always the object of the sentence, never the subject. Thus, it is never correct to say “Jerry and myself will handle the case.” The correct construction is “Jerry and I,” because *Jerry* and *I* are the actors (or subjects) in the sentence.

You also can use the reflexive pronoun for emphasis when you repeat the subject or object:

- I witnessed the crime myself.
- The defendant wanted to try the case herself.
- We have nothing to fear but fear itself.

In talking about yourself, just remember: (1) Use *I* when you are the actor in the sentence; (2) use *me* when you are the object of the sentence, including after a preposition, and even when there are multiple objects; and (3) only use *myself* as the object, and only if you are also the actor in the sentence.

Finally, learn to embrace the word *me*. It’s a perfectly fine pronoun, and it is almost always the right choice after prepositions. Don’t fear using it. It’s not less formal. It’s not poor grammar. It’s often correct.

People sometimes make mistakes not out of carelessness but because they think they are using proper grammar. Between you and me, dear reader, I hope these tips will allow you to talk about yourself with confidence.

endnotes

1. You also use the nominative case for a predicate nominative (a noun or pronoun that follows a linking verb and refers to the subject of the sentence). For example, if someone reaches me on my phone and asks for “Susie,” I should say “This is she,” rather than “This is her.” There, *she* is the predicate nominative and thus calls for a nominative-case pronoun. “This is she” sounds pretty stuffy, so I usually just say, “This is Susie.” If you want to sound like a brusque TV lawyer, though, you can just say, “Speaking.”