The Indirect Object

Recognize an indirect object when you see one.

Indirect objects are rare. You can read for pages before you encounter one. For an indirect object to appear, a sentence must first have a direct object.

Direct objects follow transitive verbs [a type of action verb]. If you can identify the subject and verb in a sentence, then finding the direct object—if one exists—is easy. Just remember this simple formula:

\[
\text{Subject} + \text{Verb} + \text{what? or who?} = \text{Direct Object}
\]

Here are examples of the formula in action:

Jim built a sandcastle on the beach.


Sammy and Maria brought Billie Lou to the party.

Sammy, Maria = subject; brought = verb. Sammy and Maria brought who? Billie Lou = direct object.

To explain the broken lamp, we told a lie.

We = subject; told = verb. We told what? Lie = direct object.

When someone [or something] gets the direct object, that word is the indirect object. Look at these new versions of the sentences above:

Jim built his granddaughter a sandcastle on the beach.


So that Darren would have company at the party, Sammy and Maria brought him a blind date.

Sammy, Maria = subjects; brought = verb. Sammy and Maria brought who? Blind date = direct object. Who got the blind date? Him = indirect object.

To explain the broken lamp, we told Mom a lie.

We = subject; told = verb. We told what? Lie = direct object. Who got the lie? Mom = indirect object.

Sometimes, the indirect object will occur in a prepositional phrase beginning with to or for. Read these two sentences:
Tomas paid *the mechanic* 200 dollars to fix the squeaky brakes.

Tomas paid 200 dollars *to the mechanic* to fix the squeaky brakes.

In both versions, the *mechanic* [the *indirect* object] gets the *200 dollars* [the *direct* object].

When the direct object is a pronoun rather than a noun, putting the indirect object in a prepositional phrase becomes a necessary modification. The preposition smooths out the sentence so that it sounds natural. Check out these examples:

Leslie didn’t have any money for a sandwich, so Smitty purchased *her* it.

Blech! That version sounds awful! But now try the sentence with the indirect object after a preposition:

Leslie didn’t have any money for a sandwich, so Smitty purchased it *for her*.

Locating the indirect object *her* in a prepositional phrase lets the sentence sound natural! Now read this example:

After Michael took generous spoonfuls of stuffing, he passed *us* it.

Ewww! This version sounds awful too! But with a quick fix, we can solve the problem:

After Michael took generous spoonfuls of stuffing, he passed it *to us*.

With the indirect object *us* in a prepositional phrase, we have an improvement!