

University of Abdurrahman Mira Bejaia
Faculty of letters and languages
French department
First year students

How to Ask Questions in English

English as a Second Language

There are many ways to ask questions in English. It's important to understand the situation when deciding how to ask questions. In other words, is the question you want to ask a polite request? Would you like to confirm the information you already know? Are you gathering details about a subject?

How to Ask Direct Questions

Direct questions are the most common type of question in English. Direct questions are asked when asking for both simple and complex information. To begin with, here is a guide to the structure of direct questions:

(Question Word) + Auxiliary + Subject + Verb Form + (objects) + ?

Examples:

- When do you get to work?
- Do you like fish?
- How long have you been working on this project?
- Where are those ties manufactured?

How to Ask Yes/No Questions

Yes/No questions refer to simple questions you ask to receive either a yes or no as a response. Yes/No questions do not use question words and always begin with the auxiliary verb.

Auxiliary + Subject + Verb Form + (objects) + ?

Examples:

- Does he live in New York?
- Have you seen that film?
- Is she going to come to the party?

How to Ask Subject and Object Questions

Look at the following example sentence and questions:

Jason likes playing golf.

What does Jason like playing? (Answer: golf)

Who likes playing golf? (Answer: Jason)

In the first question, we are asking about the **object**. When asking about the object, use direct question construction beginning with a question word followed by the auxiliary verb.

Wh? + auxiliary + subject + verb?

Who does he follow online?

In the second question, we are asking for the **subject** of the action. When asking subject questions, do not use the auxiliary verb. The 'Wh' question word plays the role of the subject in the question.

Wh? + (auxiliary) + verb + object?

Who understands this problem?

Note: Remember that the present simple or past simple do not take the auxiliary in positive sentence structure.

Examples:

- *Who enjoys playing tennis?*
- *Who is coming to the party next week?*

Common question forms for **subject** questions:

Which

Which bicycle goes fast?

What kind of

What kind of cheese tastes mild?

What sort of

What sort of tea costs very little?

Who

Who goes to school here?

How to Use Question Tags to Ask Questions

Another type of common question in English is the question tag. Many languages such as Spanish also use question tags. Use them to confirm information that you already know, or think you know. This form is used in conversation and when checking that you have understood something.

Construct a question tag by making a statement followed by a comma and the **opposite** (positive > negative, negative > positive) form of the appropriate auxiliary verb.

Examples:

- You're married, aren't you?
- He's been here before, hasn't he?
- You didn't buy the new car, did you?

Indirect Questions

When we want to be more polite we often use indirect question forms. They ask the same as direct questions but are considered more formal. When using an indirect question, use an introductory phrase followed by the question itself in positive sentence structure. Connect the two phrases with the question word or 'if' in the case the question is a yes/no question.

Construction Chart

Introductory phrase + question word (or if) + positive sentence

Examples:

- I was wondering if you know the way to the nearest bank.
- Do you know when the next train leaves?

Here are some of the most common phrases used for asking indirect questions.

Do you know...

I wonder/was wondering...

Can you tell me...

I'm not sure...

I don't know...

Examples:

- Do you know when the next train leaves?
- I wonder when he will arrive.
- Can you tell me where he lives?
- I'm not sure what he wants to do.
- I don't know if he is coming

‘Who, what, where, when why? Who is the guy?’ asked Manhattan Transfer, an American Jazz group, back in the 1970s. Unfortunately, they soon entered a world that was grammatically nonsensical, but still, the title of their song offers us a range of question words.

When we **learn English online**, question words are essential terms to help us find out more about a subject or topic.

A List of the Question Words in English

Here are the most common words used to frame a question in English. There are nine (although 'whom' is quite old fashioned and rarely used in common English). You can see that eight of the nine words begin with the letters 'Wh'; therefore, question words are sometimes known as the 'W' or 'Wh' words. More properly, question words can be called 'interrogative' words.

Who – What – Where – Why – Which – When – Whose – Whom – How

'Can', 'should' and 'would' are other words used to ask questions in English. These words tend to require a 'yes' or 'no' answer, or an affirmative. Since these question words lead to an expected answer, they are not really questions.

These questions can prompt two kinds of answers. 'Open' answers, which are based on opinion and are open to discussion. 'Closed' answers tend to be factual, short and asked for information. All of the question words above are closed except for 'why' and 'how'. This means that these are the best words to use when framing questions which are meant to prompt discussion, rather than just answers.

Who is that knocking on my door?

Used to find out which person is doing the particular thing in question. The answer will usually be factual and simple.

'Who is your best friend?'

'You, of course.'

What is that large object in the corner?

The question word 'what' is appropriate when there are many possible answers to a question. Those answers will be non-human, and usually inanimate. As with 'who' questions, the answer is mostly likely to be closed.

'What would you like for your birthday?'

'Anything from you will be special.'

Where are you going to?

Where is the question that relates to place. Once more, it is a question to elicit a straightforward answer.

'Where did you buy that amazing dress from?'

'From the clothes shop, stupid!'

Why does the sea rush to shore?

This is a higher level question which seeks an explanation for the answer. It is a question word to provoke an open ended response.

‘Why does the sun shine so brightly?’

‘Because you are in the room.’

Which is your favorite subject at college?

This is, in many ways, similar to the ‘what’ questions. However, while there are endless possible answers to a ‘what’ question, with ‘which’ the answers are limited. The response is likely to be factual, although judgments are often required in the response.

‘Which ear rings look best on me?’

‘Anything you wear looks brilliant.’

When do your dreams come true?

Whereas ‘who’ relates to people, and ‘where’ to place, ‘when’ questions will have answers connected to time. As with most of the other questions, the answers are most likely to be factual rather than based on opinion.

‘When is it time for dinner?’

‘Eight o’ clock, if you have finished cooking it by then.’

Whose voice is that I can hear?

There are similarities between the question words ‘who’ and ‘whose’. However, ‘whose’ will always be followed by a noun. The answer will be closed.

‘Whose shoes are they?’

‘I think they belong to my sister.’

Whom should I say is here?

This is an old-fashioned term, not often used today. Many native English speakers are less than clear about its accurate use. In fact, the word serves the same purpose as ‘who’ questions, but tends to be used when it is the object of the verb. With modern English, there is no real need to use the term.

‘Whom do they seek?’

‘Those whose legs are hairy.’

How can I make you smile?

Along with ‘why’ this is the other question word that sometimes provokes an open ended response. It is therefore ideal to use in discussions.

‘How do you touch a rainbow?’

‘By finding where it begins.’

Which promotes another comment by the original speaker, such as ‘And how do I do that?’ However, ‘how’ can also be used to find the answer to a straight-forward question. For example:

‘How do I open the door?’

‘Try turning the handle.’

Practicing Use of the Appropriate Question Word

As with most learning, once you understand the concept, you need to practice it to remember it! Try practicing with the exercise below (answers at the end).

Find the correct question word to start each sentence:

- _____ does the parcel arrive? (Response: Later this morning.)
- _____ has the color of my sweat shirt changed to white? (I spilt some bleach onto it.)
- To _____ should the letter be addressed? (Sir Reginald Smith-Rogers.)
- _____ did you leave the key? (In the door.)
- _____ are you feeling this morning? (A little better, thanks.)
- _____ do you change channel on the TV? (Press the button on the remote control!)
- _____ is the weather like outside? (Raining, as usual.)
- _____ type of flour makes the best muffins? (I like to use self-raising.)
- _____ is the weather warmest at the moment? (In the kitchen. We had a row!)
- _____ do you think you might be finished? (A lot sooner if you stop asking me questions.)
- I would like to know _____ you have washed my red top with my white shirt?
- To _____ should I send the reply?
- I am not sure _____ to address the letter to. Can You tell me?
- _____ name needs to go on the envelope? (As you can see, the last three questions are all similar ways of expressing the same question, but in each case the missing word is different.)

Answers:

- *When – the question relates to time.*
- *Why – it is an open ended question with many possible answers.*
- *Whom – the clue is in the starting word – ‘to’.*
- *Where – the question relates to place.*
- *How – a question with many answers.*
- *How – another question where there is no clue to the answer.*
- *What – a number of options are possible answers.*
- *Which – there are a limited number of types of flour.*
- *Where – the question relates to place.*
- *When – a question about time.*
- *Why – an open question.*
- *Whom – see above.*
- *Who – the first part of the example is not a question. This demonstrates that question words can be used in other situations.*
- *Whose – relating to a person.*
- *What – there are many answers to this question.*

