

Question Formation in English

There are two basic types of questions in English.

1. 'Wh' questions ask for specific information and start with a WH- word.

What / Which / When / Where / Whereabouts / Why / Whose / How

The most common question structure is: Question word + Auxiliary Verb + Object or Main Verb.

'Wh' questions usually have a FALLING INTONATION.

Tense	Examples
Present simple	<i>Whose is this? / What do you do?</i>
Present continuous	<i>Where are you going?</i>
Past simple	<i>When were you there? / When did she do that?</i>
Past continuous	<i>Who were playing?</i>
Pres. perf. simple	<i>Why haven't you done your homework?</i>
Pres. perf. continuous	<i>Which report have you been working on?</i>
Passive	<i>Whereabouts were they found?</i>
will / would	<i>Who will be there? / How will they get here?</i>
Can / could	<i>How could you? / What could it be?</i>

- 'What' can be followed by a noun, and is normally used when there is an unlimited number of possibilities. 'Which' is normally used with a limited number of choices.

Eg. *What type of films do you like? / Which of these 3 films did you like the most?*

When asking about people it's better to use which: *Which astronauts have landed on the moon?*

- 'How' can combine with adjectives and adverbs.

How many (countables), How much (uncountables), How tall (height), How old (age), How big (size), How fast (speed), How often (frequency), How many times (number), How long (duration), How far (distance)

Prepositions often come at the end of a question, and they are stressed when we talk.

Eg. *What are you looking at? Which channel is the film on?*

Subject and Object Questions

Most questions ask for the object of a sentence.

SUBJECT - VERB - OBJECT: Lee Oswald (S) shot (V) President Kennedy (O)

When we ask about the OBJECT, we have to use the auxiliary “DO”

*Who **did** Lee Oswald shoot?* (We are asking about the object, President Kennedy).

With the question words WHO, WHAT & WHICH, if the answer is the SUBJECT, there is NO AUXILIARY 'DO, DOES, DID and the word order is the same as a statement.

Who (S) shot (V) President Kennedy (O)?

ANSWER = SUBJECT (Lee Oswald). No auxiliary “DO”

Here are some more examples of subject questions:

SUBJECT (+ VERB + OBJECT)

Who broke the window? Peter (broke the window)

Who discovered America? Columbus (discovered America)

OBJECT QUESTIONS (Auxiliary “DO” needed)

What did Peter break? (“Peter” is the subject)

Which continent did Columbus discover? (“Columbus” is the subject)

'Like' used in questions

'LIKE' can be used as a VERB for preference and as a PREPOSITION for description.

Examples:

What does she like doing at the weekend? (VERB) = What does she enjoy doing?

What would you like to do next weekend? (VERB) = What do you want to do?

What is London like? (PREPOSITION) = Give me your general impressions of London.

Please note:

- *What is she like?* (PREPOSITION) = Describe her character (and maybe her appearance).
- *What does she look like?* (PREPOSITION) = Describe her appearance ONLY.
- *'How is she?'* REFERS ONLY TO HEALTH & WELL-BEING.

Eg. *How is your mother?* = “Is your mother in good health?”

2. 'Yes/No' questions ask for a positive or negative answer.

They normally start with an AUXILIARY or MODAL verb and are followed by SUBJECT + (VERB) + OBJECT

'Yes/no' questions normally have a RISING INTONATION.

Tense	Examples
Present simple	<i>Am I right? / Do I do it like this?</i>
Present continuous	<i>Is it working?</i>
Past simple	<i>Was she the manager? / Did you enjoy it?</i>
Past continuous	<i>Were they fighting?</i>
Pres. perf. simple	<i>Have they had dinner yet?</i>
Pres. perf. continuous	<i>Has she been working all day?</i>
Passive	<i>Was it finished on time?</i>
will / would	<i>Will she be happy in her new job? / Will you finish by 5.30?</i>
Can / could	<i>Could he be right? / Can you pass me the salt, please?</i>

Negative 'Yes/No' questions are used:

- To show surprise: *Didn't you hear the bell? I rang it four times!*
- In exclamations: *Doesn't that dress look nice!* (= That dress looks very nice)
- When we expect the listener to agree with us: *Haven't we met somewhere before?* (= I think we have)

Be careful with the answers to negative questions:

Didn't Dave go to Canada? Yes. (He went there.) / *No.* (He didn't go there.)

Reply questions

Reply questions are formed of **Auxiliary/modal verb + Subject** , and are used to show interest or surprise. They always have a strong RISING INTONATION.

Eg. A: *He has a problem* B: *Does he?*
 A: *I've finished!* B: *Have you?*
 A: *I can't do this.* B: *Can't you?*

Question tags


Question tags have the same form as reply questions but are used either to ask for confirmation or a response.

If a positive statement is made, the question tag is negative. Eg. *You're Brazilian, aren't you?*

If a negative statement is made, the question tag is positive. Eg. *You haven't finished yet, have you?*

There are TWO TYPES of question tag.

1. This tag has a falling intonation and means "I'm sure I'm right, confirm it for me".


I'm right, aren't I?

2. A question tag with a rising intonation means "I'm not sure, can you tell me if I'm right?"


Our plane leaves at ten o'clock, doesn't it?

PLEASE NOTE!

After 'Let's....' the question tag is 'Shall we?' Eg. *Let's go out for a meal, shall we?*

After the imperative the question tag is 'Will you?' Eg. *Open the door for me, will you?*

A positive question tag can follow a positive statement when expressing interest or surprise.

Eg. *Oh, You think he'll win, do you?*