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Questions and answers

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We use questions to ask for information and also for requests, suggestions, offers etc.

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In most questions there is inversion of the subject and auxiliary.

Statement: *You have written a letter.*

Question: *Have you written a letter?*

Yes/no questions and wh-questions • 24

These are the two main kinds of question.

yes/no: *Have you written a letter?*

wh: *What have you written?*

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A question word can be subject, object, complement or adverbial. *Who* can be subject or object.

Who told you? (subject)

Who did you tell? (object)

Question words: more details • 26

A question word can also be a determiner.

What/Which day are they coming?

The choice of *what* or *which* depends on the number of possible answers.

We can use *how* on its own or before an adjective or adverb.

How did you find out?

How far is it to Newcastle?

We can modify a question word.

Why exactly do you need this information?

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We can form question phrases with *what* and *how*.

What time is your train?

How much does it cost?

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Most answers to questions can be just a word or phrase.

What are you writing? ~ A letter to Kate.

We often use a short answer with *yes* or *no*.

Have you written the letter? ~ Yes, I have.

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A question can be negative.

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I've written the letter. ~ Oh, have you?

22 The use of questions

BUYING A TRAIN TICKET

Travel agent: *Can I help you?*

Customer: *Do you sell rail tickets?*

Travel agent: *Yes, certainly.*

Customer: *I need a return ticket from Bristol to Paddington.*

Travel agent: *You're travelling when?*

Customer: *Tomorrow.*

Travel agent: *Tomorrow. That's Friday, isn't it? And when are you coming back?*

Customer: *Oh, I'm coming back the same day.*

Travel agent: *Are you leaving before ten o'clock?*

Customer: *It's cheaper after ten, is it?*

Travel agent: *Yes, it's cheaper if you leave after ten and return after six o'clock.*

Customer: *What time is the next train after ten?*

Travel agent: *Ten eleven.*

Customer: *Oh, fine. Could you tell me how much the cheap ticket is?*
 Travel agent: *Twenty-one pounds.*
 Customer: *Can I have one then, please?*

- 1 The most basic use of a question is to ask for information.
What time is the next train?~ Ten eleven.
- 2 But we can use questions in other ways, such as getting people to do things.
 This happens especially with modal verbs, e.g. *can, shall.*

Requesting: *Can I have one then, please?*
 Making suggestions: *Shall we take the early train?*
 Offering: *Can I help you?*
 Asking permission: *May I take one of these timetables?*

- 3 There are also 'rhetorical questions', which do not need an answer.
What do you think will happen?~ Who knows?
You're always criticizing me, but have I ever criticized you?
Fancy meeting you here. It's a small world, isn't it?

NOTE

A question can be answered by the person who asks it.

What is the secret of United's success? Manager Terry Clark believes that it is the players' willingness to work for each other and for the team.

23 Inversion in questions

- 1 In most questions there is inversion of the subject and auxiliary.

Statement	Question
<i>You are leaving today.</i>	<i>Are you leaving today?</i>
<i>The train has got a buffet.</i>	<i>Has the train got a buffet?</i>
<i>We can sit here.</i>	<i>Where can we sit?</i>

If there is more than one auxiliary verb (e.g. *could have*), then only the first one comes before the subject.

Statement	Question
<i>I could have reserved a seat.</i>	<i>Could I have reserved a seat?</i>

- 2 In simple tenses we use the auxiliary verb *do*.

Statement	Question
<i>You like train journeys.</i>	
<i>Ox: You do like train journeys.</i>	<i>Do you like train journeys?</i>
<i>They arrived at six.</i>	
<i>Or: They did arrive at six.</i>	<i>Did they arrive at six?</i>

- 3 *Be* on its own as an ordinary verb can also come before the subject.

Statement	Question
<i>The train was late.</i>	<i>Was the train late?</i>
<i>My ticket is somewhere.</i>	<i>Where is my ticket?</i>

- 4 For short questions, • 38(3).
I thought something might go wrong. ~ And did it? ~ I'm afraid so.
- For questions without the auxiliary and *you*, • 42(2).
Leaving already? (= Are you leaving already?)

24 Yes/no questions and wh-questions

- 1 A yes/no question can be answered *yes* or *no*.
Do you sell rail tickets? ~ Yes, we do./Certainly.
Will I need to change? ~ No, it's a direct service./I don't think so.
The question begins with an auxiliary (*do*, *will*).
- 2 A wh-question begins with a question word.
When are you going? What shall we do? How does this camera work?
There are nine question words: *who*, *whom*, *what*, *which*, *whose*, *where*, *when*, *why* and *how*. For an overview, • 27.

For intonation in yes/no and wh-questions, • 54(2b).

25 Wh-questions: more details

- 1 A question word can be subject, object, complement or adverbial. Compare the positive statements (in brackets).

Subject:	<i>Who can give me some help?</i> (Someone can give me some help.)
Object:	<i>What will tomorrow bring?</i> (Tomorrow will bring something.)
Complement:	<i>Whose is this umbrella?</i> (This umbrella is someone's.)
Adverbial:	<i>When are you coming back?</i> (You are coming back some time.) <i>Where is this bus going?</i> (This bus is going somewhere.) <i>Why did everyone laugh?</i> (Everyone laughed for some reason.)

When a question word is the subject, there is no inversion. The word order is the same as in a statement.

Who can give me some help?

But when a question word is the object, complement or adverbial (*not* the subject), then there is inversion of the subject and auxiliary. For details, • 23.

What will tomorrow bring? Whose is this umbrella?

NOTE

- a A question can sometimes be just a question word. • 40
I'm going to London. ~ When?
- b A question word can be part of a sub clause.
What did you think I said? (You thought I said something.)
When would everyone like to leave? (Everyone would like to leave some time.)
- c A question can have two question words.
When and where did this happen? Who paid for what?

2 Compare *who* as subject and object of a question.

Subject: *Who invited you to the party? ~ Laura did.*
(Someone invited you.)

Object: *Who did you invite to the party? ~ Oh, lots of people.*
(You invited someone.)



Who saw the detective?
(Someone saw him.)

Who did the detective see?
(He saw someone.)

Here are some more examples of question words as subject.

- What happens next? Which came first, the chicken or the egg?*
- Who is organizing the trip? Which biscuits taste the best?*
- Whose cat has been run over, did you say?*
- How many people know the secret?*

3 A question word can also be the object of a preposition.

- Who was the parcel addressed to?*
(The parcel was addressed to someone.)
- Where does Maria come from?*
(Maria comes from somewhere.)
- What are young people interested in these days?*
(Young people are interested in something these days.)

In informal questions, the preposition comes in the same place as in a statement (*addressed to, come from*). But in more formal English it can come before the question word.

- To whom was the parcel addressed?*
- On what evidence was it decided to make the arrest?*

NOTE

- a For *who* and *whom*, • 26(3).
- b *Since* comes before *when* even in informal English.
Since when has this area been closed to the public?
This often expresses surprise. A question with *How long... ?* is more neutral.

26 Question words: more details

1 *What, which and whose* before a noun

These question words can be pronouns, without a noun after them.

What will be the best train?

There are lots of books here. Which do you want?

Whose was the idea?

They can also be determiners, coming before a noun.

What train will you catch? (You will catch a train.)

Which books do you want? (You want some of the books.)

Whose idea was it? (It was someone's idea.)

Which can come before *one/ones* or before an *of*-phrase.

Which ones do you want? Which of these postcards shall we send to Angela?

2 The use of *who, what* and *which*

Who always refers to people. *Which* can refer to people or to something not human. *What* refers mostly to something not human, but it can refer to people when it comes before a noun.

Human

Non-human

Who is your maths teacher?

Which teacher do you have?

What idiot wrote this?

Which supermarket is cheapest?

What book are you reading?

What do you do in the evenings?

Who is a pronoun and cannot come before a noun or before an *of*-phrase.

NOT *Who teacher do you have?* and NOT *Who of the teachers do you have?*

There is a difference in meaning between *what* and *which*.

What do you do in your spare time? What sport do you play?

Which is the best route? Which way do we go now?

We use *what* when there is an indefinite (and often large) number of possible answers. We use *which* when there is a definite (and often small) number of possible answers. *What* relates to the indefinite word *a*, and *which* to the definite word *the*.

What sport...? (a sport)
(Tennis, or golf, or football, or...)

Which way...? (one of the ways)
(Right or left?)

The choice of *what* or *which* depends on how the speaker sees the number of possible answers. In some contexts either word is possible.

What newspaper/Which newspaper do you read?

What parts/Which parts of France have you visited?

What size/Which size do you take?

NOTE

We can use *what* to suggest that there are no possible answers.

Why don't you invite a few friends? ~ What friends? I haven't got any friends.

3 *Who* and *whom*

When *who* is the object, we can use *whom* instead.

Who/Whom did you invite?

Whom is formal and rather old-fashioned. *Who* is more common in everyday speech.

When *who/whom* is the object of a preposition, there are two possible patterns.

Who were you talking to?

To whom were you talking?

The pattern with *whom* is formal.

4 *How*

- a *How* can express means or manner.

How do you open this bottle? (You open this bottle somehow.)

How did the children behave? (The children behaved well/badly.)

- b When it expresses degree, *how* can come before an adjective or adverb.

How wide is the river? (20 metres/30 metres wide?)

How soon can you let me know? (very soon/quite soon?)

For question phrases with *how*, • 28.

- c We also use *how* as an adjective or adverb in friendly enquiries about someone's well-being, enjoyment or progress.

How are you? ~ *Fine, thanks.*

How did you like the party?— *Oh, it was great.*

How are you getting on at college? ~ *Fine, thanks. I'm enjoying it.*

NOTE

What... like? asks about quality. Sometimes it has a very similar meaning to *How...?*

How was the film?/ What was the film like?

But *What... like?* does not refer to well-being.

How's your brother? ~ *Oh, he's fine, thanks.*

What's your brother like? ~ *Well, he's much quieter than I am.*

What does your brother look like? ~ *He's taller than me, and he's got dark hair.*

5 A special pattern with *why*

Why (not) can come before a noun phrase or a verb.

Why the panic? (= What is the reason for the panic?)

Look at our prices - why pay more? (= Why should you pay more?)

Why not stay for a while? (= Why don't you stay for a while?)

6 Modifying a question word

- a We can use an adverb to modify a question word or phrase.

When exactly are you coming back?

Just what will tomorrow bring?

About how many people live here?

- b *Else* has the meaning 'other'.

What else should I do? (= What other things ... ?)

Who else did you invite? (= What other people ... ?)

- c We can emphasize the question by using *on earth*.

What on earth will tomorrow bring?

We can also use *ever*.

What ever/Whatever can the matter be?

How ever/However did you manage to find us?

Who ever/Whoever invited that awful man?

This means that the speaker has no idea what the answer is. The emphasis often expresses surprise. The speaker is surprised that someone invited that awful man.

27 Overview: question words

Question word	Example	Word class	Positive expression
<i>who, whom</i>	<i>Who won?</i>	pronoun	<i>someone</i>
<i>what</i>	<i>What happened?</i>	pronoun	<i>something</i>
	<i>What sport(s)?</i>	determiner	<i>a sport, some sports</i>
<i>which</i>	<i>Which is/are best?</i>	pronoun	<i>one of them, some of them</i>
	<i>Which sport(s)?</i>	determiner	<i>one of the sports, some of the sports</i>
<i>whose</i>	<i>Whose was the idea?</i>	pronoun	<i>someone's</i>
	<i>Whose idea was it?</i>	determiner	<i>someone's</i>
<i>where</i>	<i>Where shall we go?</i>	adverb of place	<i>somewhere</i>
<i>when</i>	<i>When did it happen?</i>	adverb of time	<i>some time</i>
<i>why</i>	<i>Why are you here?</i>	adverb of reason	<i>for some reason</i>
<i>how</i>	<i>How do you open it?</i>	adverb of means	<i>somehow</i>
	<i>How did they behave?</i>	adverb of manner	
	<i>How wide is it?</i>	adverb of degree	
	<i>How are you?</i>	adjective	

28 Question phrases

What and *how* can combine with other words to form phrases.

- 1 *What* can come before a noun.

What time is the next train? ~ Ten eleven.

What colour shirt was he wearing? ~ Blue, I think.

What kind of/type of/sort of computer have you got? ~ Oh, it's just a desktop machine.

What make is your car? ~ It's a BMW.

- 2 We use *what about/how about* to draw attention to something or to make a suggestion.

What about/How about all this rubbish? Who's going to take it away?

What about/How about some lunch? ~ Good idea.

- 3 *How* can come before an adjective or an adverb.

How old is this building? ~ About two hundred years old.

How far did you walk? ~ Miles.

How often does the machine need servicing? ~ Once a year.

How long can you stay? ~ Not long, I'm afraid.

It can also come before *many* or *much*.

How many people live in the building? ~ Twelve.

How much is the cheap ticket? ~ Fifteen pounds seventy-five.

NOTE

How come is an informal phrase meaning 'why'. There is no inversion.

How come all these papers have been left here? ~ I'm in the middle of sorting them out.

29 Answering questions

1 How long is an answer?

Some questions you can answer in a word or phrase, but others need to be answered in one or more complete sentences. Here are some examples from real conversations.

Didn't you hear about the bank robbery? ~ No.

I've got a hat. ~ What colour? ~ Brown.

Do you like school? ~ Yes, I do. It's OK.

You haven't got central heating? ~ No, we haven't.

How long do you practise? ~ About half an hour.

Why did you sell the car? ~ It was giving me too much trouble. I was spending more money on it than it was worth spending money on.

How is Lucy? ~ She's a lot better now. In fact I think she'll be back at school next week.

It is usually enough to give the relevant piece of information without repeating all the words of the question. There is no need to say *No, I didn't hear about the bank robbery*, or *The hat is brown* in answer to these questions.

NOTE

- a We can repeat the words of the question to give emphasis, e.g. when we deny something.

Did you break this glass? ~ No, I did not break that glass.

- b There is not always a direct grammatical link between a question and answer. The important thing is that the information is relevant.

What time will you be home? ~ Well, these meetings go on a long time.

Here the questioner would realize that the meeting going on a long time means that 'I will be home late'.

- c The hearer may be unable or unwilling to answer.

What's your favourite subject? ~ I haven't really got a favourite subject.

Are you a member of this club? ~ Why do you ask?

Where are my keys? ~ You ought to know where they are.

2 Yes/no short answers

- a We can sometimes answer with a simple *yes* or *no*, but English speakers often use a short answer like *Yes, I do* or *No, we haven't*. A short answer relates to the subject and auxiliary in the question. The patterns are *yes* + pronoun + auxiliary and *no* + pronoun + auxiliary + *n't*.

	Positive	Negative
<i>Is it raining?</i> ~	<i>Yes, it is.</i>	<i>No, it isn't.</i>
<i>Have you finished?</i> ~	<i>Yes, I have.</i>	<i>No, I haven't.</i>
<i>Can we turn right here?</i> ~	<i>Yes, we can.</i>	<i>No, we can't.</i>

- b In simple tenses we use the auxiliary *do*.
Do you play the piano? ~ *Yes, I do.* (NOT *Yes I play.*)
Did Roger cut the grass? ~ *No, he didn't.*
- c In these examples the question has *be* on its own, as an ordinary verb.
Is the chemist's open today? ~ *No, it isn't.*
Are you warm enough? ~ *Yes, I am, thanks.*
- d We very often add relevant information or comment after a simple *yes* or *no* or after the short answer.
Were you late? ~ *Yes, I missed the bus.*
Were you late? ~ *Yes, I was, I missed the bus.*
Did Carl find his wallet? ~ *No, unfortunately.*
Did Carl find his wallet? ~ *No, he didn't, unfortunately.*
In some contexts *yes/no* or a short answer on its own can sound abrupt and not very polite.

We can sometimes use another phrase instead of *yes* or *no*.

Were you late? ~ *I'm afraid I was./Of course I wasn't.*

- e In a negative short answer the strong form *not* is formal or emphatic.
Was the scheme a success? ~ *No, it was not. It was a complete failure.*

- f We can also use a short answer to agree or disagree with a statement.

Agreeing: *These shirts are nice.* ~ *Yes, they are.*
The weather doesn't look very good. ~ *No, it doesn't.*

Disagreeing: *I posted the letter.* ~ *No, you didn't. It's still here.*
We can't afford a car. ~ *Yes, we can, if we buy it on credit.*

We often use a tag after the short answer.

These shirts are nice. — *Yes, they are, aren't they?*

3 Requests, offers, invitations and suggestions

- a We cannot usually answer these with just a short answer.
Can I borrow your pen, please? ~ *Sure./Of course.*
Would you like a chocolate? ~ *Yes, please. Thank you.*
Would you like to come to my party? ~ *Yes, I'd love to. Thank you very much.*
Shall we have some lunch? ~ *Good idea./Yes, why not?*

- b A negative answer to a request or invitation needs some explanation.
Can I borrow your pen? — Sorry, I'm using it to fill this form in.
Would you like to come to my party on Saturday? — I'm sorry. I'd like to, but I'm going to be away this weekend.
 A short answer (e.g. *No, you can't*) would sound very abrupt and impolite.

4 Short answers to wh-questions

- a When the question word is the subject, we can use a short answer with a subject + auxiliary.
Who's got a hair drier? ~ Neil has.
Who filled this crossword in? ~ I did.
Which shoes fit best? ~ These do.
- b We can leave out the auxiliary.
Who's got a hair drier? ~ Neil.
Who filled this crossword in? ~ Me. • 184(1b)

30 Negative questions

MY PHONE IS OUT OF ORDER

Claire: *I'll tell you more when I see you next week.*
 Anna: *Can't you ring me?*
 Claire: *No, unfortunately. My phone's still out of order.*
 Anna: *Haven't they repaired it yet?*
 Claire: *No. It's an awful nuisance. It's over a week now.*
 Anna: *Why don't you refuse to pay your bill?*
 Claire: *That wouldn't make any difference, I don't expect.*
 Anna: *Isn't there a rule? Don't they have to repair it within a certain period?*
 Claire: *I don't know. Anyway, it's not working.*

1 Use

- a A negative yes/no question often expresses surprise.
Can't you ring me? Haven't they repaired your phone?
 The context suggests that the negative is true (they haven't repaired the phone). Claire has already explained that it is out of order. But Anna is surprised at this. She thinks they should have repaired it.
- b A negative question can be a complaint.
Can't you be quiet? I'm trying to concentrate.
 This means that you should be quiet.
- A negative question with *why* can also express surprise or a complaint.
Why haven't they repaired it? Why can't you be quiet?
- c We can use *Why don't/doesn't... ?* for suggestions and *Why didn't... ?* to criticize.
Why don't we take a break now? I'm tired.
Why didn't you tell me this before? You should have told me.

We can use *why not* + verb instead of *Why don't you...* in a suggestion.

Why not use your credit card?

- d Negative questions with *who*, *what* and *which* usually request information.

Who hasn't returned this library book?

What can't you understand?

Which of the guests doesn't eat meat?

- e We can use a negative question to ask the hearer to agree that something is true.

Didn't I see you on television last night?

The meaning is similar to a tag question with a rising intonation. • 34(3)

I saw you on television last night, didn't I?

NOTE For a negative question form in exclamations, e.g. *Wasn't that fun!* • 20(3).

2 Form

- a We make a question negative by putting *n't* after the auxiliary.

Haven't you finished yet? NOT *Have not you finished yet?*

Why doesn't the government take action?

NOTE

The negative of *am I* is *aren't I*.

Why aren't I getting paid for this?

- b In more formal English *not* comes after the subject.

Have you not finished yet? *Why does the government not take action?*

- c If the question word is the subject, *n't* or *not* comes after the auxiliary.

Who hasn't returned/has not returned this library book?

- d We can use other negative words.

Are you never going to finish? *Why does the government take no action?*

NOTE

In informal speech the question can be without inversion.

You haven't finished yet?

3 Yes/no answers

The answer *no* agrees that the negative is true. The answer *yes* means that the positive is true.

Haven't they repaired it yet? ~ *No, it's an awful nuisance.*

~ *Yes, they did it yesterday.*

31 Questions with *or*

- 1 A question can contain two or more alternative answers. The word *or* comes before the last alternative.

Are you coming back today or tomorrow? ~ *Today.*

Did you speak to a man or a woman? ~ *It was a woman.*

*When are you coming back, today or tomorrow?
Who did you speak to, a man or a woman?
Were you running or jogging?*

The voice rises for the first alternative, and then it falls after *or*.
Shall we take a bus or a taxi?

NOTE

This question does not contain alternative answers.

Have you got any brothers or sisters? ~ Yes, I've got two sisters.
Here *brothers or sisters* is spoken as one phrase.

2 *Or* can link two clauses.

Are you coming back today, or are you staying overnight? ~ I'm coming back today.
The second alternative can be the negative of the first.

Are you coming back today or aren't you/or not? ~ Yes, I am.

This emphasizes the need for a yes/no answer and can sound impatient.

32 Questions without inversion

In informal conversation a question can sometimes have the same word order as in a statement. The question has a rising intonation.

The machine gives change? ~ No, it doesn't.

You're travelling tomorrow? ~ Yes.

The car is blue? ~ That's right.

The car is what colour? ~ Blue.

They went which way? ~ That way.

We use this kind of question only when it follows on from what was said before.

I need a return ticket to Paddington. ~ You're travelling when? ~ Tomorrow.

NOTE

For echo questions, • 35(1).

I'm travelling tomorrow. ~ You're travelling when?

33 Indirect questions

We can ask a question indirectly by putting it into a sub clause beginning with a question word or with *if/whether*. This makes the question sound less abrupt, more tentative.

We need to know what the rules are.

Can I ask you how much you're getting paid for the job?

Could you tell me where Queen Street is, please?

I'm trying to find out who owns this building.

Do you know when the train gets in?

I was wondering if/whether you could give me a lift.

There is no inversion of the subject and auxiliary in the sub clause.

NOT *We need to know what are the rules.*

For question word + to-infinitive, • 125.

Could you tell me how to get there?

NOTE If the main clause is a statement (*We need to know*), then there is no question mark.

34 Question tags

COAL FIRES

Gary: *It's colder today, isn't it?*

Brian: *Yes, it's not very warm, is it? I shall have to light the fire soon.*

Gary: *Oh, you have coal fires, do you?*

Brian: *Yes. We don't have central heating. You have central heating, don't you?*

Gary: *Yes, we do. But coal fires are nice, aren't they? More comforting than a radiator.*

Brian: *Yes, but they're a lot more work than just switching on the heating. We keep talking about getting central heating put in.*

Gary: *I suppose coal fires aren't very convenient, are they?*

Brian: *They certainly aren't.*

1 Form

- a A tag relates to the subject and auxiliary of the main clause. The structure of a negative tag is auxiliary + *n't* + pronoun, e.g. *isn't it*.

It's raining, isn't it?

You've finished, haven't you?

We can go now, can't we?

- b In simple tenses we use the auxiliary verb *do*.

Louise works at the hospital, doesn't she?

You came home late, didn't you?

- c In these examples the main clause has *be* on its own, as an ordinary verb.

It's colder today, isn't it?

The sausages were nice, weren't they?

- d A positive tag is like a negative one, but without *n't*.

It isn't raining, is it?

You haven't finished, have you?

NOTE The form of question tags

- a We can use the subject *there* in a tag.

There were lots of people at the carnival, weren't there?

But we do not use *this*, *that*, *these* or *those* in the tag. We use *it* or *they* instead.

That was lucky, wasn't it? Those are nice, aren't they?

- b After *I am...* the tag is *aren't I*.

I'm late, aren't I?

- c After a subject such as *everyone*, *someone* etc, we use *they* in a tag.

Anyone could just walk in here, couldn't they?

- d In more formal English, *not* can come after the pronoun.

Progress is being made, is it not?

- e We can use *don't you think* when asking someone's opinion.

These pictures are good, don't you think?

- f In informal English we can use *yes*, *no*, *right* and *OK* as tags. *Right* and *OK* are more common in the USA. • 303(4)

These figures are correct, yes? You like London, no?

I'll be outside the post office, right? We're going to start now, OK?

But as a general rule learners should not use these tags. Often a tag like *aren't they* or *don't you* is better.

2 Overview: patterns with tags

There are three main patterns.

	Statement	Tag	
PATTERN A	Positive	Negative	<i>It's your birthday, isn't it?</i>
PATTERN B	Negative	Positive	<i>It isn't your birthday, is it?</i>
PATTERN C	Positive	Positive	<i>It's your birthday, is it?</i>

3 Pattern A: positive statement + negative tag

This kind of tag asks the hearer to agree that the statement in the main clause is true. It is sometimes obvious that the statement is true. For example, in the conversation both speakers know that it is colder today. The tag (*isn't it*) is not really a request for information but an invitation to the hearer to continue the conversation.

It's difficult to find your way around this building, isn't it?~ Yes, I'm always getting lost in here.

That was fun, wasn't it?~ Yes, I really enjoyed it.

When the statement is clearly true, then the speaker uses a falling intonation on the tag.

It's cold, \ isn't it?

But when the speaker is not sure if the statement is true, then the tag is more like a real question, a request for information. The speaker's voice rises on the tag.

You have central heating, & don't you?~ Yes, we do.

We're going the right way, & aren't we?~ I hope so.

NOTE

Sometimes a tag with a rising intonation can express surprise.

They have central heating, don't they? Everyone has central heating nowadays.

The speaker is surprised at the idea that someone might have no central heating. The meaning is similar to a negative question: *Don't they have central heating?* • 30

4 Pattern B: negative statement + positive tag

The use is mostly the same as for Pattern A. Compare *It's colder, isn't it?* and *It's not so warm, is it?* As in Pattern A, the voice falls or rises depending on how sure the speaker is that the statement is true.

We can also use Pattern B in a tentative question or request.

You haven't heard the exam results, have you? ~ No, sorry, I haven't.

You couldn't lend me ten pounds, could you? ~ Yes, OK.

We can also use Pattern B to express disapproval.

You haven't broken that clock, have you? ~ No, of course I haven't.

You aren't staying in bed all day, are you?

This means 'I hope you aren't staying in bed all day.'

NOTE

A negative statement can have a negative word other than *not*.

We've had no information yet, have we?

5 Pattern C: positive statement + positive tag

Pattern C also asks the hearer to agree that the statement is true. It also suggests that the speaker has just learnt, realized or remembered the information. Look at this example from the conversation *Coal fires*.

I shall have to light the fire soon. ~ Oh, you have coal fires, do you?

The positive tag means that the information is new to Gary. He has just realized from Brian's words that Brian has coal fires. The meaning is the same as 'So you have coal fires'. Here are some more examples.

I can't help you just at the moment. ~ You're busy, are you? ~ Very busy, I'm afraid.

Annabelle is out in her new sports car. ~ Oh, she's bought one, has she? ~ Yes, she got it yesterday.

Compare patterns A and C.

We can't move this cupboard. ~ It's heavy, isn't it?

(I already know that it is heavy.)

We can't move this cupboard. ~ It's heavy, is it?

(I have just learnt from your words that it is heavy.)

6 Tags with the imperative and *let's*

Pass me the salt, will/would/can/could you? • 19(4)

Let's have a rest now, shall we?

35 Echo questions and echo tags

1 Echo questions

We can use an echo question when we do not understand what someone says to us, or we find it hard to believe.

I often eat bits of wood. ~ What do you eat?/You eat what?

My father knew Ronald Reagan. ~ Who did he know?/He knew who?

Did you see the naked lady? ~ Did I see the what?

The second speaker is asking the first to repeat the important information.

These questions can usually be with or without inversion. They are spoken with a rising intonation on the question word.

& What have they done? They've done & what?

NOTE

a The question word *what* on its own can be an echo question or an exclamation.

I often eat bits of wood. ~ What?/What!

b We can use a yes/no question to check that we heard correctly.

I often eat bits of wood. ~ You eat bits of wood?