

Asking Questions

Asking questions is an essential part of learning and living. We usually ask questions to obtain information. A *statement* such as

The time is 6pm.

gives information whereas a question seeks information.

What is the time?

The basic structure of a question can usually be summarised as

auxiliary verb + subject + main verb + completion

Examples

auxiliary verb	subject	main verb	completion
Do	you	know	the time?
Are	you	feeling	well?
Will	Ewa	go	to Texas?
Have	you	seen	the Queen?

In the above questions information is being sought.

“Yes” or “No” questions

Many questions involve a simple “Yes” or “No” answer as seen in the following questions

auxiliary verb	subject	main verb	completion	Answer
Do	you	want	coffee?	Yes or No
Did	she	finish	the course?	Yes, I do
Will	Ewa	drive	to Warsaw?	No, she didn't
Has	Tom	measured	the speed?	Yes, she will
Have	they	gone	to sleep?	No, he hasn't
				Yes, they have

Choice Questions

This type of question involves making a choice and in a sense the answer is in the question as seen in the following examples

auxiliary verb	subject	main verb	or	answer
Would	you	like	tea or coffee?	Coffee, please
Did	they	go	to Bangkok or to Singapore?	They went to Singapore
Was the	temperature	found to be	above or below 120°C?	It was below
Will	he	be	happy or sad?	He will be sad

Information Type Questions

In these questions the answer gives information not contained in the question. These questions are preceded by a question word.

Questions with no auxiliary verb

Consider the following examples:-

Word	Verb to be	Subject	Completion	Answer
	Is	Ewa	Dutch?	No, she is Polish
	Was	Ewa	ever in Holland?	No, never
	Were	they	drunk?	No, just merry
What	is	Polish	for pig?	świnia
Where	is	Poland?		In Europe

Tag Questions

A tag question is a statement that has been transformed into a question by putting a question tag at the end. Tag questions always end in a verb or a pronoun.

Examples of Statements and Tag Questions

Statement	Tag Question
He chased the cat	He chased the cat, didn't he?
She married him in haste	She married him in haste, didn't she?
The calculation is too difficult	The calculation is too difficult, isn't it?
You can't do it	You can't do it, can you?

The preceding examples illustrate some typical types of question structures. In practical situations care needs to be exercised. In some cases a badly phrased question may appear impolite or intrusive. In some cases considerable tact is required to elicitate the desired information. An indirect question may yield the desired information whereas a direct question may simply offend. In many cases it is desirable to prefix the question with words to transform the question from a direct question to a polite query.

Polite prefix	Impolite or Direct Question
Please would you tell me	what is the time?
Please will you	carry this for me?
Would you mind repeating	what you said?
If you don't mind telling me	why was he sacked?
Can you tell me	why do you chill the mixture?

The last two examples illustrate transforming a direct question into an indirect question. Notice in each case the person being questioned is given the option of not answering the question. This at least leaves open the possibility of asking further questions whereas had the direct questions been asked it might have terminated all further questions.

Rhetorical Questions are questions where an answer is not expected. A famous exception is Millikan's nomination of Edison for admission to the US National Academy of Sciences in 1926.

Edison was nominated by the engineering section, and at the 1926 annual meeting Robert A Millikan rose to endorse the nomination. But when Millikan said (he thought rhetorically), "I am sure that no physicist would wish to oppose Mr. Edison's nomination." A. A. Michelson, then thought to be the greatest physicist in the world, rose and said, "I am that physicist."

Tone and Asking Questions

The manner in which a question is asked can make a considerable difference to the resulting answer. Politeness and tact is certainly a significant part of asking questions but so is the tone used in asking the question. This is particularly the case in asking inquisitorial questions. If the tone is harsh or aggressive answers may not be forthcoming. One also needs to be culturally sensitive in asking questions. For example, in Western Society it is often considered rude to ask someone, out of curiosity, "How old are you?" whereas in many Asian countries you can expect to be asked that question by persons of all ages.

How, Why, Who, Which, When, Where, What,

When seeking information many questions will be prefixed with one of the above interrogative adverbs as in the following examples:-

How do you measure the temperature of the milk?

How are you after the long flight?

How is your mother-in-law coping?

How will you get to Texas?

Why do you pasteurise the milk?

Why is the milk turning green?

Why are you stirring the milk?

Why were you crying?

Who is responsible for safety in the factory?

Who are those people with green hair?

Who spilled the milk?

Who was the person with blue hair?

Which type of disinfectant do you use for cleaning?

Which do you prefer - the black or the red?

Which is the best variety to plant?

When were you promoted to your current position?

When do we go to dinner?

When are we going to catch the bus?

When is the bus coming?

Where are the pigs housed?

Where is the bookshop?

Where were you yesterday?

Where do I go to buy shoes?

Where can I get shoes?

What time is the lecture?

What is the time?

What if the engine stalls?

What breed are the blue pigs?

What did you do to the sick cow?

In many cases you may wish to prefix some of the above questions with a polite statement such as "Please could you tell me what time is the lecture?"

See if you can list some questions starting with **Do, Did, Will, Have, or Are**