

Lesson 31: Asking Permission & Asking Indirect Questions

As you learned in the last lesson, the words you use make a big difference in whether your phrase is polite or impolite. Today we're going to study examples of how to ask questions in a polite and indirect way.

Asking Permission

Liz is staying at her friend Mary's house for a few days. Listen to their conversation:

Mary: It's getting late... I'm going to bed.

Liz: OK. Would it be all right if I watched TV for a few more minutes?

Mary: Sure – go right ahead.

Liz: Oh and also – could I use your phone charger? My cell phone battery's almost dead.

Mary: No problem – here you go. I'm leaving for work early tomorrow morning – feel free to eat anything you find in the fridge.

Liz: Thanks. Do you mind if I cook? I might want to make an omelet or something.

Mary: Not at all. Just please make sure to clean up afterwards.

Liz: I will. By the way, what time are you getting home tomorrow?

Mary: Probably around 6. Why?

Liz: Do you think I could have a key? So that if I go out, I could get back in before six.

Mary: Sorry, but I actually can't give you one... the landlord doesn't let anyone in the building give out spare keys – you know, because of security concerns. He's pretty strict about it.

Liz: Oh okay – no worries! Good night.

Mary: G'night.

Conversation Vocabulary and Phrases

Liz uses several different phrases to ask Mary for permission. Here are various ways to do this in English:

- **Can I... + verb?**
Can I borrow your pen?
- **Could I... + verb?**
Could I have a little piece of your sandwich?
- **May I... + verb?**
May I take the day off from work tomorrow?
"May" is now considered very formal, and most people use one of the other expressions on this list instead.
- **Do you think I could... + verb?**
Do you think I could stay at your place over the weekend?
- **Do you mind if I... + verb?**
Do you mind if I smoke?
- **Would you mind if I... + verb in past tense?**
Would you mind if I used your computer for a few minutes?
- **Is it OK if I... + verb?**
Is it OK if I open the window?
- **Would it be OK/all right if I... + verb in past tense?**
Would it be all right if I opened the window?
- **Would it be possible for me to... + verb?**
Would it be possible for me to call you at home later tonight?

The most common phrases in the list are "Can I..." "Could I..." and "Is it OK if I...?" The expressions beginning with "Would" are the most formal.

Notice the form of the verb in each phrase. The questions "Would you mind if I..." and "Would it be OK/all right if I..." use the verb in the past tense, even though you are asking permission for an action in the present/future.

Mary says "yes" to a number of Liz' requests. Here are some expressions for giving permission in English:

- **"Sure."**
- **"Go ahead." / "Go right ahead."**

- **“No problem.”**
- **“Feel free.”**
- **“Not at all.”**

This response can ONLY be given to the “Do you mind...” or “Would you mind...” questions.

To say “no” to someone’s request in a polite way, you can use one of these phrases:

- **“I’d prefer if you didn’t / don’t.”**
- **“I’m afraid that’s not possible.”**
(formal)
- **“Sorry, but... (give reason why you must say no).”**
(informal)

Asking Indirect Questions

Direct questions are the “normal” questions beginning with **who, what, when, where, why, how, and do/does/did**. We can use direct questions with friends and colleagues who we know well.

Indirect questions are used when we want to add a little extra politeness – for example, when speaking with someone we don’t know, with a person who we respect or who is in a position of authority, or when asking a question of a sensitive nature.

For example:

- **Direct Question:** “Where is the bathroom?”
- **Indirect Question:** “Could you tell me where the bathroom is?”

Here are some phrases you can use to ask indirect questions:

When asking for information:

- **“Could you tell me...?”**
Could you tell me how much this T-shirt costs?
- **“Do you know...?”**
Do you know if there’s a bank around here?

- **“Do you have any idea...?”**

Do you have any idea what time the next bus is coming?

Use the first phrase when you’re asking somebody who probably has the answer – for example, asking an employee in the store how much the T-shirt costs. Use “Do you know...” if there’s a possibility that the other person doesn’t know the answer, and use “Do you have any idea...” if there’s *little* possibility that the other person knows the answer.

When asking if something is possible:

- **“Would it be possible...?”**

Would it be possible for you to finish the project by tomorrow?

- **“Is there any chance...?”**

Is there any chance that we could reschedule the meeting?

Use these for questions that would use “can” or “could” in the direct question form:

- Can/Could you finish the project by tomorrow?
- Can/Could we reschedule the meeting?

When asking any type of question or favor:

- **“I was wondering...”** (more polite)

I was wondering why you chose to study biology.

I was wondering if you could give me a ride.

- **“I’d like to know...”** (more direct)

I’d like to know what kind of classes are offered here at the community center.

I’d like to know if you have any products on sale at the moment.

As you may have noticed from the examples, it’s necessary to make some grammatical changes when asking indirect questions:

- 1) **Auxiliary verbs do/does/did are not used:**

~~“Could you tell me what time **do** the stores open?”~~

“Could you tell me what time the stores open?”

- 2) **Because “does” is not used, -s is added to verbs when the subject is singular:**

~~"Do you know how **does** this machine **work**?"~~

"Do you know how this machine **works**?"

3) **Because "did" is not used, the verb is in the simple past for past questions:**

Direct: When **did** you **send** the documents?

Indirect: I was wondering when you **sent** the documents.

Direct: How much **did** you **pay** for the tickets?

Indirect: Could you tell me how much you **paid** for the tickets?

4) **Forms of the verb "to be" move from before to *after* the subject:**

~~"I was wondering when **was** the company founded."~~

"I was wondering when the company **was** founded."

~~"Do you have any idea where **are** my keys?"~~

"Do you have any idea where my keys **are**?"

5) **Yes/No direct questions have "if" in the indirect question:**

Direct: Does he like to ski?

Indirect: Do you know **if** he likes to ski?

Direct: Did you have any trouble understanding the lecture?

Indirect: I was wondering **if** you had any trouble understanding the lecture.

6) **For present perfect questions, we still use the auxiliary verbs "have/has," but the position changes – it goes from before to *after* the subject:**

Direct: **Has** the client replied yet?

Indirect: Could you tell me if the client **has** replied yet?

Direct: How **have** your parents been?

Indirect: I was wondering how your parents **have** been.

These seem like a lot of rules... but as you see and hear many examples of indirect questions, it'll get easier to form them naturally.

Finally, what do you say if someone asks you a question, but you don't know the answer? Here are some phrases for saying you don't know:

- **"Sorry, I don't know."**

- **"(I'm afraid) I have no idea."**
- **"I don't know, but I can find out."**
Say this when you are promising to help discover the answer
- **"I'm not sure, but I think..."**
Say this when you aren't certain about the answer, but you'll try to guess
- **"I have no clue."** (informal)
- **"Sorry, I can't help you there."**
- **"What are you asking me for?"** (informal – RUDE)
- **"How the hell should I know?"** (informal – VERY RUDE)

The last two phrases are used to express annoyance or anger that the person has asked you the question. They should only be used if you're in a very bad mood and you want to be rude to the other person!

You've finished Lesson 31! Today's speaking task is to transform these direct questions into indirect questions using the phrases in this lesson. It's OK to write out your answers first, then record a message of yourself reading them aloud. Visit www.speakpipe.com/espressoenglish to record your message.

Direct Questions:

- 1) When does the bank open?
Example answer: Could you tell me what time the bank opens?
- 2) Where is the bus station?
- 3) Are you coming to the party?
- 4) How does this program work?
- 5) Has the director made a decision yet?
- 6) Can you lend me \$10?
- 7) Could you let me know as soon as possible?
- 8) Does your brother like rock music?
- 9) What's the weather forecast?
- 10) Is she married?
- 11) How long have you been working here?
- 12) When will you be available next week?
- 13) What time did you get home?