



IIT Madras
ONLINE DEGREE

STRUCTURE OF QUESTION SENTENCES

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- In many languages that we know of, there are no special rules for forming questions. In English, however, question sentences are formed in only one of the two ways.

- Either, they start with “Is/was/Am/Are/were” or some other auxiliary verb, such as in the following sentences:

- *Is he joining the university this year?*
- *Are they going on a holiday together?*
- *Was this shop here last year?*
- *Have you paid the last installment for this house?*
- *Did they not know the rules?*

- Or, they start with some “wh-” word, like “how, what, when, where, which, whose, whom, why” and a few other “wh-” words, such as the following.

- *How are you going to pay for this car?*
- *What is your name?*
- *When is the cargo likely to be delivered?*
- *Where do you live?*

- Notice that “How” does not begin with “wh-”, yet it is grouped with questions words of this class. That is only for the sake of convenience. Since all other words here begin with “Wh-”, this word is also clubbed with them.
- What is the difference between questions beginning with “Is/are” and the questions beginning with “Wh-”?
- Depending upon what they begin with, they are either called “Wh-” questions, or “Yes/No” questions. This seems arbitrary.

- Questions beginning with “Is/Are/...” are almost always answered in either “yes” or “no”. Actually, therefore, they should rather be called “yes/no” answers, than “yes/no” questions. But popular psychology and rule of convenience put them that way.
- “Wh-” questions, on the other hand, expect specific answers. You can not say “yes” when you are asked “what is the time, please?”, or, “What is your name, please?”. You will have to answer these questions with specific words like It is 10:10 now, or, I am Shreesh, etc.

- So let us first talk about the structure of “Yes/No” questions. All questions of this kind begin with the first auxiliary verb in that sentence. See the following, for instance.

- *Are you coming to the class tomorrow?*
- *Have you been coming to the class these days?*
- *Can the classes be conducted on line for primary school students?*
- *Could people have been told about the pandemic last year?*

- In all of these sentences there are many auxiliary verbs. Some books of grammar also call them helping verbs.
- If sentences mentioned above were to be written as assertive sentences, or as sentences making statements, then they would be rewritten as follows.

You are coming to the class tomorrow.

- The verbal group has two full words, and “+ing”, but because the order is fixed, the question sentence here begins with the first of them, that is “Are”.

You have been coming to the class these days.

- The verbal group has three words, “ have been come+ing”, but the question sentence begins with “Have”, which comes first.

Classes can be conducted on line for primary school students.

- The verbal group here has three words, “can be conduct+ed”, but because “Can” comes first in the group, the question sentence in this case also begins with “Can”.

People could have been told about the pandemic last year.

- Verbal group has four words, “could have been tell + ed”, but because the group begins with “Could”, the questions sentence is formed accordingly, beginning with “could”.

ACTIVITY 1

- See the following table. The first column has sentences in the assertive, or declarative form. Writing in the second column in the table below, make “Yes/No” question sentences out of them.

Forming Question Sentences

Declarative Sentences	Question Sentences
Father of Rajam is a policeman.	
His answers would be powerful.	
You are saying it just to please me.	
The tailor has been asking for money.	

You will give me your attention.	
Your father has asked you to stay at home.	
Rajam had known that his friends were waiting.	
Rajam had seen his father doing it.	

ANSWERS

Declarative Sentences	Question Sentences
Father of Rajam is a policeman.	Is father of Rajam a policeman?
His answers would be powerful.	Would his answers be powerful?
You are saying it just to please me.	Are you are saying so just to please me?
The tailor has been asking for money.	Has the tailor been asking for money?

You will give me your attention.	Will you give me your attention?
Your father has asked you to stay at home.	Has your father asked you to stay at home?
Rajam had known that his friends were waiting.	Had Rajam known that his friends were waiting?
Rajam had seen his father doing it.	Had Rajam had seen his father doing it?

- There are some “yes/no” questions which begin with “Do/does/did” even when they are not obviously there in the declarative sentence. Look at the following sentences, for instance.

- a. Devadutt rises with the sun every morning.*
- b. Devadutt does not go to bed with the sun every evening.*

- Questions for the sentences given above can be of the following kind.

- a. Does Devadutt rises with the sun every morning?*
- b. Does Devadutt not go to bed with the sun every evening?*

- a. Devadutt rises with the sun every morning.*
- b. Devadutt **does** not go to bed with the sun every evening.*

- In b., the first word of the verbal group is “does”. So it is all right if the question for this sentence begins with “Does”. But questions sentence for “a.” will also begin with “Does”, producing the question as shown in the previous slide.

- So the second rule for the construction of question sentences is that a sentence that does not have a stand alone auxiliary verb can use “do/does/did” as appropriate to begin a “yes/no” question with. See the following for example.

- Pindaruch gets rains between June and October every year.*
- It rains in November and December in Chennai,.*
- The Baghmati river is flooded every year in July.*
- But the Bay of Bengal can never be in flood.*

- Helping verbs, “is” and “can”, are seen in c. and d. But in a. and d. no such verb is seen. To change them into question sentences, therefore, English uses “do/does/did”, as appropriate.

a. Does Pindaruch get rains between June and October every year?

b. Does it rain in November and December in Chennai?

c. Is the Baghmata river flooded every year in July?

d. But can the Bay of Bengal never be in flood?

- So we see that sentences that do not have a helping verb to be taken the front of the sentence use “do’/does/did”, as appropriate for this purpose.
- How does English make negative questions, such as the following.

- a. Do Eskimos not live near the North Pole?*
- b. Does a man not go out for morning walks in cold countries?*

- Ordinarily, in their neutral, declarative form sentences as above. Are like those given below.

- a. Eskimos do not live near the North Pole.*
- b. A man does not go out for morning walks in cold countries.*

ACTIVITY 2

- Make some question sentences out of the declarative sentences given in the table below.

Declarative Sentence	Question Sentence
Early bird get the worm	
John does not like history.	
Geometry attracts Maya most.	
Money cannot be the only factor in Job Choice.	

ANSWERS

Declarative Sentence	Question Sentence
Early bird gets the worm	Does early bird get the worm?
John does not like history.	Does John not like history?
Geometry attracts Maya most.	Does geometry attract Maya most?
Money cannot be the only factor in Job Choice.	Can money be the only factor in job choice?

- So the Rule of Forming Question Sentences remains unchanged, namely,

- 1. To form “yes/no” questions, the first helping verb is taken to the beginning of the sentence.**
- 2. Where there is no visible helping verb, an appropriate form of “DO/Does/Did” is used.**

How are “Wh-” questions formed ? Almost the same way, except that the “Wh-” word is used before the auxiliary verb. See the following sentences. What could be their normal declarative forms.

- a. What is your name?*
- b. When does the sun rise here in Chennai in winter?*
- c. Why do people value more than any other wealth?*
- d. Which road leads to Mathura?*
- e. Where did Hanuman find Sita?*
- f. How did Shri Ram pass time away from Sita?*
- g. What is not available in this store?*

- a. My name is Ruth, Ruth O'Hara.
- b. In winter, the sun rises in Chennai at 5:42 in winter.
- c. There are reasons why people value money more than wealth.
- d. This road leads to Mathura.
- e. Hanuman found Sita under a tree in Ravan's garden.
- f. Shri Rama spent time with the priests and in matters of state.
- g. Ethnic dishes are not available in this store.

- Each “Wh-” word does a specific function, as given in the table below.

Wh-Word	Function	Example
How	Manner	How do you go to college daily?
What	Question about Noun	What is your name ?
When	Question about time	When can you meet the students?
Where	Question about place	Where does the sun go after sunset?
Which	Question about noun	Which road do you take to town?
Why	Reason, Purpose	Why do you want to buy another flat?

ACTIVITY 3

- Form questions with these “Wh-” words.

Thank you!