

Grammar Reference

Indirect questions

Meaning and use

There are two ways to ask questions in English – directly and indirectly. Both have the same meaning, but we use **indirect questions** if we want to sound more formal or polite, especially when we are talking to people we don't know.

(direct question) *What time is it?*

(indirect question) *Could you tell me what time it is?*

When we create indirect questions, the thing we are asking about becomes part of a longer question. And we use introductory phrases such as:

Can/could you tell/show me ...?

Do you know ...?

Would you mind telling/showing me ...?

Have you any idea ...?

I wonder ...

I wonder if you would mind telling/showing me ...?

This is followed by either a question word, such as **what, who, when, where, how**, or by **if/whether**, and then the information we want to know. The word order changes from the order of a direct question. Indirect questions have the same word order as statements.

(direct question) *Where is the photocopier?*

(indirect question) *Do you know where the photocopier is?*

If we are making an indirect question from a direct question which already contains a question word, like **what, who, when, where or how**, we keep that same question word.

(Direct question) - **What** is the dress code in the office?

(Indirect question) - *Could you tell me **what** the dress code is in the office?*

If the direct question doesn't have a question word, then we use **if** or **whether** in the indirect question. We can use these interchangeably, although **if** is a little more informal.

(Direct question) - *Is the coffee for everyone?*

(Indirect question) - *Could you tell me **if** the coffee is for everyone?*

Form

Indirect questions have the same word order as statements:

introductory phrase + if or whether/question word + subject + verb

Look at the following:

(statement) - *The meeting is at two.*

(direct question) - *When is the meeting?*

(indirect question) - *Do you know when the meeting is?*

(indirect question) - *Do you know if the meeting is at two?*

Notice that the subject and verb in indirect questions after the question word **when** or **if/whether** are in the same order as in statements, i.e. **subject + verb**

(subject) (verb)

The meeting is ...

... *the meeting is*

In the direct question, however, the order is: **verb + subject** after the question word.

When *is the meeting* ?

Take note: *do, does and did*

In the present and past simple, we use **do/does** or **did** to make direct questions. When we make indirect questions in the present and past simple, we don't use these auxiliaries.

(direct question) - What time **does** the meeting **start**?

(indirect question) - Can you tell me what time the meeting **starts**?

(direct question) - Why **did** you **leave** your last job?

(indirect question) - Can you tell me why you **left** your last job?

(direct question) - **Did** Mr Yenko **ring** yesterday?

(indirect question) - Do you know if Mr Yenko **rang** yesterday?