
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute Grammar

Indirect questions



NB This is not a word-for-word transcript

Catherine

Hello and welcome to 6 Minute Grammar with me, Catherine.

Rob

And me, Rob. Hello.

Catherine

Today we're talking about indirect questions.

Rob

That'

s right: Indirect questions. We'll tell you what they are, how to make them and when to use them

Catherine

There'll a quiz at the end of the show, so listen carefully.

Rob

Let's start with a simple question. Catherine: What time is it?

Catherine

It is 18 minutes past 11, Rob.

Rob

And that question uses normal question word order. What – time – is – it? But there's another way to ask that question. Let's listen to Mike:

Mike

Could you tell me what the time is?

Rob

Yes, it's still 18 minutes past 11! Thanks Mike. This is a much more polite way of asking a question. It's called an **indirect question** and it has two parts. The first part is the phrase **Could you tell me...**

Catherine

... and the second part is the question word **what** with the information we want to know. Here it is again:

Mike

Could you tell me what time it is?

Catherine

And there are lots of phrases that we can use in the first part of an indirect question. Here are some of them:

Rob

Do you know....?

Mike

Do you know when the film finishes?

Rob

Have you any idea?

Mike

Have you any idea where I left my phone?

Rob

Would you mind telling me ...?

Mike

Would you mind telling me how this machine works?

Rob

Now, let's get a closer look at the second part of indirect questions. And it's important to note that we don't use question word order.

Catherine

That's right, the subject and verb are in the same order as they are in statements. So, we don't say **Can you tell me what time is it?** We say **Can you tell me what time it is?** It's subject - **it** - plus verb - **is**. Listen out for the statement word order in these indirect questions:

Mike

Do you know when the film finishes?

Have you any idea where I left my phone?

Would you mind telling me how this machine works?

Catherine

One more time please?

Mike

Do you know when the film finishes?

Have you any idea where I left my phone?

Would you mind telling me how this machine works?

Rob

Thanks Mike now, let's talk about yes - no questions. Here are some **direct** questions.

Mike

Is this coffee for everyone?

Does the canteen open for breakfast?

Can I use this computer?

Catherine

Now, listen to the **indirect** questions. They use statement word order again, so listen out for that, and also listen out for the two words that come after the part one phrases.

Mike

Do you know if this coffee is for everyone?

Do you know if the canteen opens for breakfast?

Do you know whether I can use this computer?

Catherine

One more time please?

Mike

Do you know if this coffee is for everyone?

Do you know if the canteen opens for breakfast?

Do you know whether I can use this computer?

Rob

So, use **if** or **whether** in yes - no questions. The meaning is the same, but **whether** is a bit more formal than **if**.

IDENT

6 Minute Grammar from BBC Learning English dot com.

Rob

And we're talking about indirect questions.

Catherine

That's right, and we use indirect questions a lot in English, especially when we are talking to people we don't know.

Rob

Let's recap: there are two types of indirect questions: those that use question words like **what, where, when, why** and **how** ...

Catherine

... and those that use **if** or **whether**.

Rob

But all indirect questions have the same word order as statements.

Catherine

They do. Now, a quick word about tenses. Listen to these direct questions.

Mike

Does this programme finish soon?

Did a package arrive for me this morning?

Catherine

The first question was in the present simple tense. We had the auxiliary **does** with the verb **finish**.

Rob

And the second question was in the simple past, with the auxiliary **did** and the verb **arrive**. Let's hear the indirect questions now.

Mike

Can you tell me if this programme finishes soon?

Could you tell me if a package arrived for me this morning?

Catherine

So, no **does** or **did** in the indirect questions. In the first question, it's **finishes** in the present simple.

Rob

...and in the second question, it's **arrived**, in the past simple.

Catherine

Simple!

Catherine

And now: it's quiz time. Number one. Which is correct? Is it a) Can you tell me where the coffee machine is? Or b) Can you tell me where is the coffee machine?

Rob

It's a) Can you tell me where the coffee machine is?

Catherine

Good. Number two. a) Do you know if this machine does give change? Or b) Do you know if this machine gives change?

Rob

It's b) Do you know if this machine gives change?

Catherine

And number three. Have you any idea what the time is? Or b) Have you any idea what is the time is?

Rob

It's a) Have you any idea what the time is?

Catherine

Well actually, it's time for the end of the show. Well done if you got those right.

Rob

There's lots more about this on our website at bbclearningenglish.com. Join us again for more 6 Minute Grammar soon.

Both

Bye.