

What Is an Indirect Question? (with Examples)

Indirect Question

An indirect question is a question embedded inside a statement (i.e., a [declarative sentence](#)) or another question (i.e., an [interrogative sentence](#)).

Let's start with a [direct question](#):

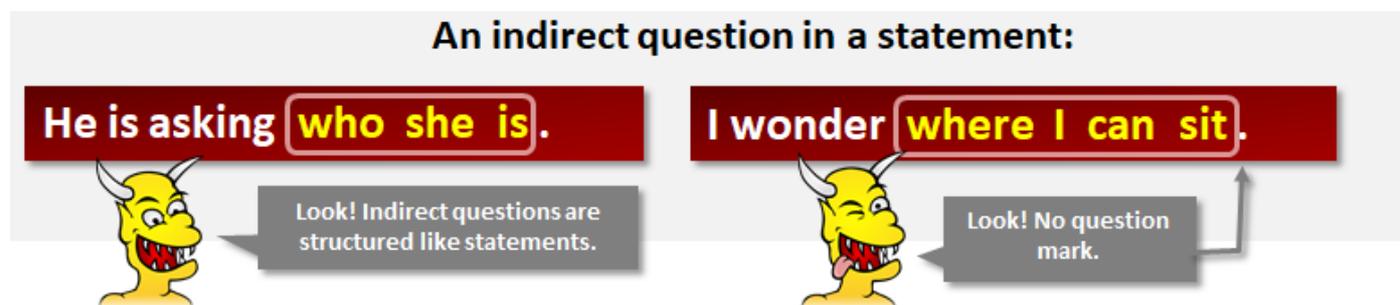
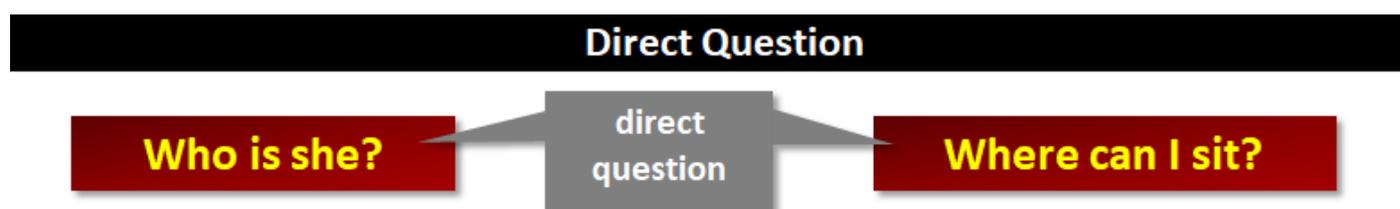
- Do you like cheese?

Here it is as an indirect question in a statement:

- She asked **whether I liked cheese.**

The word *whether* can be replaced with *if* in these examples.

[Read more about if and whether.](#)



Got it? Take a quick test.

Easy Examples of Indirect Questions

An indirect question can be embedded in a statement, another question or an order.

- I wonder **whether** Anne is happy.
(The embedded direct question is "Is Anne happy?". This is a direct question within a statement, i.e., within a **declarative sentence**.)
- Do you know **if** anyone was listening?
(The embedded direct question is "Was anyone listening?". This is a direct question within a question, i.e., within an **interrogative sentence**.)
- Please find out **what** time the train is due.
(The embedded direct question is "What time is the train due?". This is a direct question within an order, i.e., within an **imperative sentence**.)

Real-Life Examples of Indirect Questions

- I wonder **whether** other dogs think poodles are members of a weird religious cult. (Comedian Rita Rudner)
- Does anyone know **if** Lamborghini makes wheelchair vehicles? (American footballer Steve Gleason, who is battling Lou Gehrig's disease)
- In order to know **what** he is, a man must first know **what** the sum of this mysterious humanity is, a humanity made up of people who, like himself, do not understand **what** they are. (Russian author Leo Tolstoy)

More about Indirect Questions

When the direct question is a yes-no question, the indirect question will start with *if* or *whether*.

- I'm asking **if** you are cold.
- I'm asking **whether** you are cold.
(The embedded direct question is "Are you cold?". This is a yes-no question.)

Indirect Questions Are Worded Like Statements not Questions.

When the **direct question** starts with a question word like *how*, *what*, *when*, *where*, *which*, *who*, *whose*, or *why* (called **interrogative pronouns** or **interrogative adjectives**), the indirect question will start with the question word, but the word order is like a statement not like a question.

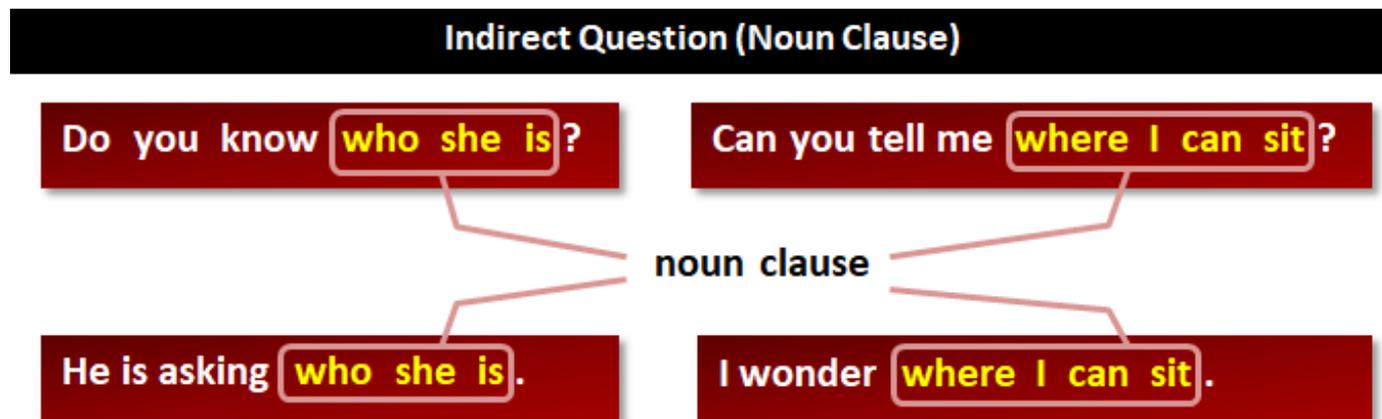
- I'm asking **what** the time is.
(The embedded direct question is "What time is it?". Notice that the indirect question has the word order "the time is" (i.e., subject +

verb) not "is the time" (i.e., verb + subject). In other words, an indirect question has the same word order as a statement, not a question.)

- I'm asking **where** you are going.
(The embedded direct question is "Where are you going?". The word order for the indirect question is "you are going", i.e., subject + verb.)
- I don't know **who** my grandfather was; I am much more concerned to know **what** his grandson will be. (American president Abraham Lincoln)

Indirect Questions Are Noun Clauses.

Indirect questions are classified as **noun clauses**. (A noun clause is a multi-word noun that features a subject and a verb.)



[Read more about noun clauses.](#)

Why Should I Care about Indirect Questions?

For native English speakers, there are three common issues related to indirect questions:

(Issue 1) Don't use a question mark with a non-question.

By far the most common mistake with indirect questions is using a **question mark** at the end of a sentence that isn't a question.

- She needs to know where you're going? ❌
- Tell the staff if you feel cold? ❌
- Mark is trying to determine whether he's allergic to cats? ❌
(These are not questions. There should be no question marks.)

Before using a question mark, make sure the whole sentence is a question.

- Does she need to know where you're going? ✅

- Will you tell the staff if you feel cold? ✓
- Is Mark trying to determine whether he's allergic cats? ✓

(Issue 2) Use *whether* unless you're presenting a condition.

These two sentences are both grammatically sound, but they mean different things.

- Tell the staff **if** you need a seat.
(This means tell the staff only if you need a seat. In other words, needing a seat is a condition that needs to be true before the staff are told. This is called a [conditional sentence](#).)
- Tell the staff **whether** you need a seat.
(This means tell the staff about your seating needs. There are two alternatives: needing a seat and not needing a seat. The staff are to be told in either case. In other words, there is no condition that needs to be true.)

Often *if* and *whether* are interchangeable when heading an indirect question, but bear this point in mind when choosing between them. Remember that if you're stating a condition, use *if*. If you're not, use *whether*.

[Read more about conditional sentences.](#)

(Issue 3) Get the word order right.

Remember that the word order in an indirect question is the same as for a [declarative sentence](#) (i.e., a statement) and not an [interrogative sentence](#) (i.e., a question). For example:

Word Order in a Question:

- Where are you?
(The word order is verb-subject: verb (*are*) then subject (*you*).)

Word Order in a Statement:

- You are there.
(The word order is subject-verb: subject (*you*) then verb (*are*).)

Word Order in an Indirect Question:

- I want to know where you are. ✓
(The word order is subject-verb: subject (*you*) then verb (*are*). It's the same word order as a statement.)
- I want to know where are you. ✗

Key Points

- An indirect question does not warrant a question mark. Only a direct question does.

- Bear in mind that *if* and *whether* are not always interchangeable. *If* heads a condition. *Whether* doesn't.
- The word order of an indirect question is the same word order as a statement (subject-verb) not a question (verb-subject).