

35 Question words

Open questions are questions that do not have simple “yes” or “no” answers. In English, they are formed by using question words.

See also:

Forming questions **34**

Prepositions of time **107**

35.1 QUESTION WORDS

There are nine common question words in English.

What is used to ask questions about things.

What is the time?



When is used to ask questions about time.

When is dinner?



Why is used to ask for reasons.

Why are you mad?



Where is used to ask about places or directions.

Where is the café?



Who is used to ask about people.

Who is Jo's teacher?



Whom is a formal version of “who,” that can only be used as an object of a question.

Whom did you give the package to?



How is used to ask about a condition, or the way something is done.

How are you?



How can also be used with an adjective or an adverb to ask about the degree to which the adjective applies.

How busy is she?



Which is used to ask someone to specify between two or more named things.

Which car is yours?



Whose is used to ask who is the owner of something.

Whose cat is this?



35.2 "WHAT / WHICH"

"What" is used when the question is general. "Which" is used when there are two or more possibilities in the question.

There are no choices in the question.

What is the tallest building in the world?



The question includes a choice of possible answers.

Which building is taller, Big Ben or the Eiffel Tower?



FURTHER EXAMPLES

What is the highest mountain in the Alps?



Which mountain is higher, the Matterhorn or Mont Blanc?



What sort of food do you like?



Which do you prefer, the red skirt or the blue skirt?



35.3 "HOW OFTEN" AND "WHEN"

"How often" is used to ask about the frequency with which someone does an activity.

"When" is used to ask about the specific time that they do something.

"How often" asks about frequency.

How often do you go on vacation?



I usually go on vacation once a year.

"When" asks about the specific time something happens.

When do you go running?



I go on Thursday nights.

FURTHER EXAMPLES

How often do you go to the beach?



Not very often.

When do you go to the gym?



On Tuesdays and Fridays.