

How many ways can you ask a question?

The notion that questions are formed by inverting subject-verb inversion is very common yet inaccurate. In fact, the subject and the verb are not inverted. The subject and the first auxiliary are inverted, and if there is no auxiliary, then DO (do, does, did) is added.

Especially in American English, DO is added even when the auxiliary is HAVE. We would say, “Do you have anything to drink?” rather than “Have you anything to drink?” although both forms are recognized as correct.

Also, if the main verb is BE (am, are, is, was, were), then it is placed before the subject. Since BE is also an auxiliary, this is not entirely an exception to the usual practice. Examples: Are you there? Were they happy? The idea that WH- words (who, what, when, where, why, and how) form questions is also very common, yet just wrong. WH- words often occur in questions, but they also occur in statements and do not in themselves constitute a question.

Moreover, in spoken English, we frequently pose questions other than by subject-first auxiliary inversion. So, here you have a summary of five ways that we actually pose questions:

- 1. subject—first auxiliary inversion**
 - a) if there is no auxiliary, add DO
 - b) if the verb is BE, treat it as an auxiliary
- 2. by changing the intonation of a statement**

the tone may rise at the end of the sentence or the questioned word may be stressed

 - a) They won the game. (statement)
 - b) THEY won the game. (them, not someone else)
 - c) They WON the game. (or was it just forfeit)
 - d) They won the SERIES. (not just part of it)
- 3. leave a blank at the end; the person is supposed to fill in the answer; the intonation also leads the listener**
 - a) And you went _____ (= Where did you go?)
 - b) You did that because _____ (= Why do you do that?)
- 4. put the WH- word in place of the questioned item**
 - a) this does not have to be at the end of the sentence
 - b) if the verb is in question, we use “DO what”
 - c) examples
 - I should do what with the garbage?
 - We might go where?
 - You saw who at the park?
- 5. add a tag question,**
 - a) form: <Statement>, AUX + pronoun?
 - b) Positive statement + Negative tag
 - c) Negative statement + Positive tag
 - d) examples
 - John took the bus, didn't he?
 - John didn't take the bus, did he?
 - We will be on time, won't we?
 - We won't be on time, will we?
 - You walk, don't you?
 - They didn't do it, did they?

These five ways of posing a question are not equivalent. Each has its own nuances and appropriate situations. We will discuss that in class.