

Types of questions

(1) Open questions

"Hasn't the weather been awful this summer?"
"Shouldn't you wait for a better offer before you sell your house?"
"Didn't you use to work in China?"

These questions are useful when you want to express your opinion in a way that shows that you want to involve the other person. As these examples show, they can be used to turn an obvious statement into a discussion, to make an opinion seem less direct, and to check a fact that you're not sure of.

(2) Closed questions

"In an ideal world, what would your dream job be?"
"So what if money were no object?"

These questions typically include the word 'would', 'might' or 'could'. It's also possible to start this type of question with 'what if + past tense'. Questions like this aren't great for starting a natural sounding conversation, but they're very useful for keeping a conversation going when you have run out of other ideas.

(3) Negative questions

"Why didn't you come to this conference last year?"
"Where did you go on holiday this year?"

In theory, these are good for 'opening a conversation up', because there are many possible answers. In practice, questions with why or how are often better at opening up a conversation than questions with where or when, which can often be answered with a single word or phrase.

(4) Hypothetical questions

"And there's nothing you can do about it?"
"You work in pharmaceuticals?"
"Really?"

These are the easiest questions to make, but they can be a very effective way of checking information and encouraging the other person to expand something he/she said earlier. You can change the focus of the question simply by stressing different words.

(5) Question tags

"Have you had a holiday this year?"
"Do you do any sports?"

These work in the same way as negative questions, by turning a statement into a question. These are often used to check something we are not sure of, as in the first example, which has rising (questioning) intonation, or simply to invite the other person to respond to your opinion.

(6) Statements with questioning intonation

"Your wife's a doctor, isn't she?"
"It's been a great party, hasn't it."

In theory, these 'close down the conversation', by allowing a one-word answer: yes or no. In practice, only a very rude person would answer with a single word, so they can actually be very effective for keeping conversations going.