

QUESTION TAGS

Question tags in statements

A question tag is an interrogative structure that is added at the end of a sentence, typically a statement (an affirmative or negative sentence), usually with the purpose of transforming that statement into a question:

You're not married, are you?

A question tag consists of an auxiliary verb and a subject pronoun, which are the same as in the original sentence. Typically, when the preceding statement is negative, the tag is positive, and viceversa (reversed-polarity tags). If the tag is negative, the short form *n't* is added to the auxiliary in oral English (but in formal English *not* is added at the end):

It's five o'clock, isn't it?

Producing children is rather the point of royal marriages, is it not?

However, affirmative tags are also common after affirmative statements (same-polarity tags). The preceding statement usually repeats some previous information, or expresses a conclusion drawn from previous information, and it typically expects to elicit (= obtain as a reply) further information on that topic:

So, you're David's sister, are you?

If the subject of the main clause is not a personal pronoun, it is replaced by one in the question tag:

Your sisters were nurses, weren't they?

Exercise 1. Write question tags for these sentences. Use reverse-polarity tags:

- a) Ankara is the capital of Turkey, _____ ?
- b) He's feeling better today, _____ ?
- c) She's at home because she's sick, _____ ?
- d) Memorising this isn't necessary, _____ ?
- e) You and I were having a lot of fun, _____ ?
- f) That's my notebook, _____ ?
- g) She wasn't crying, _____ ?
- h) That pen isn't red, _____ ?
- i) Smoking is bad for you, _____ ?
- j) The baby isn't crying, _____ ?

Remember:

The apostrophe is on the same key as the question mark:



Intonation

The intonation of a question tag can be rising (as in a yes/no question) or falling (as in a statement or a whquestion). A rising intonation sounds more tentative or insistent, whereas a falling intonation expresses more certainty:

It's not too late, is it?

- Rising intonation = I am not sure / I'm afraid it might be too late
- Falling intonation = I am fairly sure / Don't you agree? / Can't you see?

Terrible weather, isn't it?

- Falling intonation typically, to make or maintain conversation
→ phatic function.

As we can see in the last example, in colloquial English the subject and auxiliary of the preceding statement can be omitted when the speaker is going to repeat them again in the tag.

Exercise 2. Write question tags for these sentences, using reverse-polarity tags. Think about their function (informative or phatic):

a) This steak is excellent, _____ ?	informative	phatic
b) Oh, that's your new car, _____ ?	informative	phatic
c) She's a really nice girl, _____ ?	informative	phatic
d) Today's Wednesday, _____ ?	informative	phatic
e) It's a bit cold in here, _____ ?	informative	phatic
f) Your parents are from France, _____ ?	informative	phatic
g) They're the best, _____ ?	informative	phatic
h) The new teacher's great, _____ ?	informative	phatic
i) This is black ink, _____ ?	informative	phatic
j) We're having a very rainy winter, _____ ?	informative	phatic

Auxiliary

The auxiliary that appears in the question tag depends on the structure of the preceding sentence:

- If there is an auxiliary verb in the statement (or if *be* is the only verb), the same auxiliary is used in the question tag. If there are several auxiliaries, the first one is repeated. These **auxiliaries** include *do, does, did, have, has, had, is, are, was, were, will*, and also the **modal auxiliaries** *can, could, may, might, must, should, and ought* (for *will* and *shall* as modal auxiliaries, see notes on special cases below).

We might run into trouble, mightn't we?

- If the preceding statement has no auxiliary verb (in present simple and past simple), then the auxiliaries *do / does / did* are used in the tag:

You know where you're going, don't you?
He said the same thing, didn't he?

Exercise 3. Write the question tags for these sentences. Use reverse-polarity tags:

- a) That man should be more careful, _____ ?
- b) He doesn't know the truth, _____ ?
- c) You didn't take my pen, _____ ?
- d) I could use a computer for that, _____ ?
- e) The film hasn't finished, _____ ?
- f) You were all born in Manchester, _____ ?
- g) It was raining, _____ ?
- h) You haven't seen a calculator, _____ ?
- i) We're not staying until six, _____ ?
- j) They'll love this present, _____ ?
- k) You were driving too fast, _____ ?
- l) It might be difficult to find a room, _____ ?
- m) You'll leave me a light on, _____ ?
- n) He can stay with his cousins, _____ ?
- o) You don't drink much tea or coffee, _____ ?
- p) We must hurry up, _____ ?
- q) And he's not helping much, _____ ?
- r) They must have a British teacher, _____ ?
- s) That should be enough, _____ ?
- t) You ought to be in the other lane, _____ ?
- u) Tomorrow will be sunny, _____ ?
- v) But then there was an accident, _____ ?
- w) You forgot the last question, _____ ?
- x) There's a new teacher, _____ ?
- y) You haven't finished your lunch, _____ ?
- z) They came by train, _____ ?

Tags with "have"

- When the verb is *have (got)* —in the sense of *own*—, it functions as an auxiliary, so the same verb can be used in the tag:

The guy's got some money, hasn't he?

The guy has some money, hasn't he? / doesn't he?

- The same thing happens when it is the auxiliary of the present perfect or the past perfect:

He's arrived safely, hasn't he?

They had not foreseen that possibility, had they?

- However, when *have* does not mean *own*, when it is in the past, or when it is followed by *to* (that is to say, when it behaves as an ordinary verb), we have to use *do/does/did*, just like we do for an ordinary yes/no question:

Do you have any idea what it costs? You really have no idea, **do** you?
(have = "tener", but not "poseer")

How often **do** you have a shower? You have it every day, **don't** you?
(have = "tomar, darse,...")

How many dogs **did** you have? You had three, **didn't** you?
(have = "poseer", but it is in the past)

Do we have to photocopy that today? We have to do it soon, **don't** we?
(have to = need to)

Exercise 4. Write the question tags for these sentences. Use reverse-polarity tags:

- a) We have to be more careful, _____ ?
- b) He hasn't got much patience, _____ ?
- c) She has beautiful hair, _____ ?
- d) You have a shower every day, _____ ?
- e) She's got something special, _____ ?
- f) You have a question, _____ ?
- g) They had a black dog, _____ ?
- h) We still have a chance, _____ ?
- i) A spider has eight legs, _____ ?
- j) We have an exam next week, _____ ?

Exceptions and special cases

- If the main clause begins with *there be*, then *there* is repeated in the tag:

There's a lot of smoke here, isn't there?

- When the subject of the preceding statement is an indefinite subject such as *anyone*, *somebody* or *everyone*, the pronoun in the tag is *they*.

Everybody knows that, don't they?

Somebody must have taken it, mustn't they?

- If the auxiliary in the statement is *am* and the tag is negative, *aren't* is used in the tag, to make pronunciation easier:

I am talking a lot, though, aren't I?

- If the statement is in the future and the subject is *I* or *we*, then *shall* is normally used (these sentences are usually offers or suggestions, and the speaker wants to know if the hearer will accept it):

I'll ask them if they can come, shall I?

Then we will say good-bye in the morning, then, shall we?

- Remember that **'d** can replace both *would* and *had*. Look at these examples, where they are both usually contracted in oral English:

She'd rather not go alone, wouldn't she? (would rather = preferiría)

We'd better take a taxi, hadn't we? (had better = será mejor que)

- The form *mayn't* is not common. In formal English *may...not* is used, but in oral English it is usually replaced by *mightn't*.

It may rain, mightn't it? / may it not?

- Similarly, *oughtn't* is sometimes replaced by *shouldn't* or other forms:

The highway ought to be somewhere around here, shouldn't it?

- "Used to", which is considered a semiauxiliary verb, uses "did":

You used to be a vegetarian, didn't you, Jen?

- The verb "need" usually uses "do / does", even when it works as the auxiliary verb in the statement:

You don't need much material for that, do you?

You needn't use much material for that, do you?

- The form "ain't" often replaces "isn't", "aren't", "hasn't" and "haven't" in colloquial English, especially in American English:

Detroit's a great big wonderful town, ain't it?

Exercise 5. Write the question tags for these sentences. Use reverse-polarity tags:

- a) Someone broke in through the window, _____ ?
- b) We have to use colour pens, _____ ?
- c) You have all done your homework, _____ ?
- d) You had some problems last year, _____ ?
- e) He has never been very hard-working, _____ ?
- f) We don't have to finish it today, _____ ?
- g) This had happened before, _____ ?
- h) We've got to buy more bread, _____ ?
- i) Your dog has a floppy ear, _____ ?
- j) Charles used to play here as a kid, _____ ?
- k) We'll meet at six, _____ ?
- l) You two haven't finished yet, _____ ?
- m) We have to wait here, _____ ?
- n) I'd better apologise to her, _____ ?
- o) You had an accident, _____ ?
- p) They had a bit of luck, _____ ?
- q) You hadn't seen it, _____ ?
- r) I'm number five, _____ ?
- s) I'm irresistible in this dress, _____ ?
- t) I may inspect the books, _____ ?
- u) He'd rather go to the circus, _____ ?
- v) I'll buy the drinks, _____ ?

Exclamations and directives

- Tags can also be added to **exclamative sentences**:

What a nice girl she is, isn't she?

There is very little difference with phatic tags:

She's a very nice girl, isn't she?

- Tags can also be added to **imperative sentences**:

Answer the phone, can you?

When a question tag is added to an imperative sentence, its function changes; instead of a command it can become:

- An invitation:
Have some more cake, won't you?
(= Won't you have some more cake?)
- A colloquial request:
Answer the phone, can you?
(= Can you answer the phone, please?)
- A polite request:
Pass me the salt, could you?
(= Could you pass me the salt, please?)
- A formal request:
Type out this letter, would you?
(= Would you type out this letter, please?)
- A more or less insistent request, depending on the tone; if the intonation is falling, then it is equivalent to a reprimand:
Be quiet, will you?
(= Will you please be quiet?)
- A sharp command:
Sit still, can't you?
(= Can't you sit still?)

Exercise 6.

Revise the class notes and write 20 sentences with question tags. Make your sentences as varied as possible, please. Write them on a separate piece of paper, to hand in to your teacher for correction.

Try not to plagiarise these examples, please – use your imagination and creativity. The first time I did this in class, 10 of my students looked at the first example in exercise 1 and wrote "Madrid is the capital of Spain, isn't it?"