

Embedded Questions

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Grammar Notes

A. Introduction

An embedded question is a question that is *inside* another question or statement.

Tip:

Think of "embed" as "in bed." When you're in bed, you're tucked in between the sheets. An embedded question is a question tucked inside another one!

B. Patterns

Pattern	Description	Examples
Sentence	A normal English sentence follows this pattern: Subject + Verb (+ Object) or SVO .	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> She sang. S V The boy walked his dog. S V O
Question	A normal question has an auxiliary verb before the subject. It looks like this: (WH Word) + Auxiliary Verb + Subject + Main Verb (+ Object) or VSVO . For the <i>Be</i> verb, it looks like this: VSO .	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What did he say? WH V S V Do you like pizza? V S V O Is she a doctor? V S O
Embedded Question	In an embedded question, the question inside the statement or other question follows a sentence pattern instead of a question pattern: SVO . (The introductory phrases will follow the normal sentence or question patterns.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I don't know [what that means]. S V V WH S V Do you think [we need more time]? V S V S V O

C. Uses

Use Embedded Questions...	Examples
To be more polite	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What time is it? (<i>normal question</i>) Could you (please) tell me what time it is? (<i>embedded question = more polite</i>)
To give more information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I wonder if she'll call me. (<i>expresses curiosity</i>) I don't know where my bag is. (<i>expresses lack of knowledge</i>) I want to know when this meeting will start. (<i>expresses desire for knowledge</i>)
To change direct speech to reported (indirect) speech	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "What do you want to know?" (<i>direct speech</i>) He asked me what I wanted to know. (<i>reported speech</i>)

Grammar Notes cont.

D. Examples of Embedded Questions within Questions

Common Introductory Question Phrases	Questions	Embedded Question Examples
Do you know...	When does the class start?	Do you know when the class starts?
Who knows...	What is the answer?	Who knows what the answer is?
Do you think...	Can he come tonight?	Do you think he can come tonight?
Do you remember...	Where is the restaurant?	Do you remember where the restaurant is?
Could you tell me...	Is there free parking?	Could you tell me if there is free parking?
Would you mind telling me...	What time is it?	Would you mind telling me what time it is?

E. Examples of Embedded Questions within Statements

Common Introductory Statement Phrases	Questions	Embedded Question Examples
I wonder...	Is our teacher sick today?	I wonder whether (or not) our teacher is sick today.
I asked...	Does she have a cold?	I asked if she had a cold.
I want to know...	How much was your car?	I want to know how much your car was.
I don't know...	Who does this book belong to?	I don't know who this book belongs to.
I'm not sure...	Where are my keys?	I'm not sure where my keys are.
The question is...	Should we go ahead with it?	The question is if we should go ahead with it (or not).
Let's ask...	Do they like video games?	Let's ask whether they like video games (or not).

Grammar Notes cont.

F. Tense Changes from Direct to Reported Speech

When embedded questions are used in reported speech, the verb tense usually changes. Look at the chart below. Imagine that the direct questions were asked yesterday, and today you are reporting what was said yesterday. Notice the common verb tense changes.

Direct Speech Tense	Reported Speech Tense	Example
Simple Present	Simple Past	What does she want ? → He asked what she wanted .
Present Progressive	Past Progressive	Are you coming to the party? → She asked if I was coming to the party.
Simple Past	Past Perfect	Did they pass the test? → I asked whether they had passed the test.
Present Perfect	Past Perfect	Have you been to Europe? → I asked if you had been to Europe.
Simple Future	Conditional	When will he arrive ? → She asked when he would arrive .

G. Notes

Note #1

Unlike embedded WH questions, embedded Yes/No questions must start with *if* or *whether*. *If* and *whether* have the same meaning, but *if* is more common.

- What time is it? →
Could you tell me what time it is?
- Are you coming over? →
Could you tell me **if** you are coming over?
- Do they need help? →
Could you tell me **whether** they need help?

Note #2

Statements with *whether* or *if* can stand alone or be used with *or not*. Notice the placement of *or not* in the sentences below.

- ✓ I wonder **whether** the game is canceled.
- ✓ I wonder **whether** the game is canceled **or not**.
- ✓ I wonder **whether or not** the game is canceled.
- ✓ I asked **if** we were allowed to go.
- ✓ I asked **if** we were allowed to go **or not**.
- ✗ I asked **if or not** we were allowed to go.

Grammar Notes cont.

G. Notes cont.

Note #3

Remember to use a question mark if the introductory phrase is a question.

- **Could you tell me** where the bank is?

Do not use a question mark if the introductory phrase is a statement.

- **I don't know** where the bank is.

Note #6

Who knows is used for questions, but it can also be used for statements. English speakers often use this phrase as a statement when they are surprised or frustrated.

- ✓ Who knows the answer to #2?
- ✓ Who knows what she meant by that.
- ✓ Who knows when this week will start getting better.

Note #4

Embedded questions are a type of **noun clause**. A noun clause is a complete sentence (SVO) that serves as the subject or object of another sentence.

- What do you mean?
V S V
- I don't know [what you mean].
S V WH S V
O

(The noun clause *what you mean* serves as the object of the sentence *I don't know*.)

Note #7

If the subject of the introductory statement/question and the embedded question are the same, it is often possible to use an *infinitive verb*.

- He asked, "How do I get to the bank?" → He wants to know how **to get** to the bank.
- She asked, "Who do I give the report to?" → She asked who **to give** the report to.

Note #5

Never use contractions at the end of an embedded clause.

- ✓ Do you know what time **it is**?
- ✗ Do you know what time **it's**?

Exercise 1

EMBEDDED QUESTIONS

Change the direct questions into embedded questions.

1. I want to know _____ *who that was* _____ .
(Who was that?)
2. Do you remember _____ ?
(When does the meeting start?)
3. I wonder if _____ .
(Do they like sushi?)
4. Who knows _____ ?
(What time is it?)
5. They asked _____ .
(Where is the restaurant?)
6. She's not sure _____ .
(What does he want?)
7. Does he think _____ ?
(Will it be a nice day?)
8. Could you tell me _____ ?
(Do they eat meat?)
9. I want to know _____ .
(How do I get to the post office?)
10. She asked _____ .
(Do you want more pasta?)

Exercise 2

DIRECT QUESTIONS

Change the embedded questions into direct questions.

1. I want to know when you're leaving.

When are you leaving?

2. He is wondering why the class started late.

3. Could you tell me what time the movie starts?

4. Do you know if she'll be late?

5. I wonder whether I should talk to the principal or not.

6. We asked how to get to the library.

7. Would you mind telling us where the bathroom is?

8. Do you think they're going to show up?

9. She doesn't remember when she handed in her assignment.

10. The question is whether or not we should wait.

Exercise 3

COMPLETE THE SENTENCES

Complete the questions and sentences using an embedded question of your choice. Pay attention to the punctuation at the end of your sentence.

1. Do you know _____
2. I don't know _____
3. I wonder _____
4. Do you think _____
5. Could you tell me _____
6. Do you remember _____
7. I'm not sure _____
8. I asked _____
9. Would you mind telling me _____
10. I want to know _____
11. Let's ask _____
12. Can you tell me _____
13. I'd like to know _____
14. I don't remember _____
15. Who knows _____

Exercise 4 (Student A)

PAIR WORK

First, write three or more questions on the blank lines.
Then interview your partner by adding an introductory phrase
and changing the question into an embedded question.
Take turns asking and answering each other's questions.

1. What's your favorite movie?
2. How long have you been studying English?
3. What's your dream job?
4. What do you think of this city?
5. Will there be a third world war?

6. _____
7. _____
8. _____

Example:

Joe: *[What's your favorite restaurant?]*
 Could you tell me what your favorite restaurant is?

Maria: I love that Italian place on Main Street. They have the best lasagna.
 [How many siblings do you have?]
 I'd like to know how many siblings you have.

Joe: Well, I have one brother and three sisters.
 We have a pretty big family.
 [continues with the next question]

Exercise 4 (Student B)

PAIR WORK

First, write three or more questions on the blank lines.
Then interview your partner by adding an introductory phrase
and changing the question into an embedded question.
Take turns asking and answering each other's questions.

1. What is the most amazing trip you've ever taken?
2. Do you like to learn new things?
3. What kind of music do you like?
4. How often do you exercise?
5. Do you worry about the future?

6. _____
7. _____
8. _____

Example:

Joe: *[What's your favorite restaurant?]*

Could you tell me what your favorite restaurant is?

Maria: I love that Italian place on Main Street. They have the best lasagna.

[How many siblings do you have?]

I'd like to know how many siblings you have.

Joe: Well, I have one brother and three sisters.

We have a pretty big family.

[continues with the next question]

Exercise 5

REPORTED SPEECH

Change the direct speech into reported speech. Use "She asked" as the introductory phrase. For embedded question verb tenses, refer back to the Tense Changes chart on page 4.

1. "Do you have a pen?"

She asked if I had a pen.

2. "What time is it?"
-

3. "Where are you going?"
-

4. "What will you wear?"
-

5. "Are you studying now?"
-

6. "Where have you been?"
-

7. "Why didn't you listen to me?"
-

8. "Do you want to go out for dinner?"
-

9. "Did you remember to bring my book?"
-

10. "Will you help me with my homework?"
-

Exercise 7

FIND THE ERRORS

Rewrite the correct sentences.

1. Do you know when is the meeting starting?

Do you know when the meeting is starting?

2. Would you mind tell me if you've been waiting here long?

3. I asked had he left yet.

4. Do you think they will make it on time.

5. I want to know whether not we will get a refund.

6. Could you telling me where the nearest ATM is?

7. Let's find out the movie will start on time or not.

8. I wonder when will the new gym open.

9. Can you let me know why didn't you return my call?

10. The question be whether or not school will be canceled.

Exercise 8

CLASS SURVEY

Write five more ideas in the blank spaces. When you talk to your classmates, add introductory phrases to make embedded questions. If your classmate answers "Yes," write his or her name in the column on the right. Try to talk to as many different classmates as you can.

Example:

Lee: Nina, would you mind telling me if you get eight hours of sleep every night?

Nina: Yes, I always get eight hours of sleep. I go to bed at 11:00 pm and get up at 7:00 am.

#	Find someone who...	Name
1	is concerned about the environment.	
2	plays a musical instrument.	
3	has met a celebrity.	
4	knows where a good Mexican restaurant is.	
5	can tell you how to get to a coffee shop.	
6		
7		
8		
9		
10		

Exercise 9

QUIZ

Imagine you are new to the city. Write an embedded question (statement **or** question form) below each prompt.

Ex. You need to go to the bank.

I was wondering how to get to the bank.

Ex. You want to buy new shoes.

Can you please tell me how to get to the mall?

1. You wonder what the famous sites are.

2. Your car's engine is making a funny sound.

3. You want to take karate lessons.

4. You don't know what time the Italian restaurant opens.

5. You need a haircut.

6. You want a new jacket.

7. You don't know what time the coffee shop closes.

8. You want to volunteer at a local charity.



Exercise 9 cont.

9. You need help because someone broke into your apartment.

10. You don't have your friend's phone number.

11. You want to apply for a new job.

12. You need help filling out a form.

13. You want to learn how to play the guitar.

14. You found someone's wallet.

15. You want to know where you can take English classes.
