**Tag Questions**

You speak English, don't you?

A tag question is a special construction in English. It is a statement followed by a mini-question. We use tag questions to ask for confirmation. They mean something like: "Is that right?" or "Do you agree?" They are very common in English.

The basic structure of a tag question is:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **positive statement** | **negative tag** |
| Snow is white, | isn't it? |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **negative statement** | **positive tag** |
| You don't like me, | do you? |

Notice that the tag repeats the auxiliary verb (or main verb when *be*) from the statement and changes it to negative or positive.

**Positive Statement Tag Questions**

Look at these examples with **positive statements**. You will see that most of the time, the auxiliary verb from the positive statement is repeated in the tag and changed to negative.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **(+) positive statement** | | | | **(-) negative tag** | | |
| **subject** | **auxiliary** | **main verb** |  | **auxiliary** | **not** | **personal pronoun same as subject** |
| You | are | coming, |  | are | n't | you? |
| We | have | finished, |  | have | n't | we? |
| You | do | like | coffee, | do | n't | you? |
| You |  | like | coffee, | do | n't | you? |
| They | will | help, |  | wo | n't | they? |
| I | can | come, |  | can | 't | I? |
| We | must | go, |  | must | n't | we? |
| He | should | try | harder, | should | n't | he? |
| You |  | are | English, | are | n't | you? |
| John |  | was | there, | was | n't | he? |

Notice:

* the use of *do* in the two coffee questions. Remember that in Present Simple, *do* is optional in positive statements (*You like coffee/You do like coffee*). But the *do* must appear in the tag. The same applies to Past Simple *did*.
* in last two questions, no auxiliary for main verb *be* in Present Simple and Past Simple. The tag repeats the main verb.

**Negative Statement Tag Questions**

Look at these examples with **negative statements**. Notice that the negative verb in the original statement is changed to positive in the tag.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **(-) negative statement** | | | | | | **(+) positive tag** | |
| **subject** | **auxiliary** |  | **main verb** |  |  | **auxiliary** | **personal pronoun same as subject** |
| It | is | n't | raining, |  |  | is | it? |
| We | have | never | seen |  | that, | have | we? |
| You | do | n't | like |  | coffee, | do | you? |
| They | will | not | help, |  |  | will | they? |
| They | wo | n't | report |  | us, | will | they? |
| I | can | never | do |  | it right, | can | I? |
| We | must | n't | tell |  | her, | must | we? |
| He | should | n't | drive |  | so fast, | should | he? |
| You | wo | n't | be |  | late, | will | you? |
| You |  |  | are | n't | English, | are | you? |
| John |  |  | was | not | there, | was | he? |

Notice:

* *won't* is the contracted form of *will not*
* the tag repeats the auxiliary verb, not the main verb. Except, of course, for the verb *be* in Present Simple and Past Simple.

**Answering Tag Questions**

How do we answer a tag question? Often, we just say *Yes* or *No*. Sometimes we may repeat the tag and reverse it (They don't live here, *do they*? Yes, *they do*). Be very careful about answering tag questions. In some languages, an opposite system of answering is used, and non-native English speakers sometimes answer in the wrong way. This can lead to a lot of confusion!

Answer a tag question according to the **truth** of the situation. Your answer reflects the real facts, not (necessarily) the question.

For example, everyone knows that snow is white. Look at these questions, and the correct answers:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **tag question** | **correct answer** | ***notes*** | |
| Snow is white, isn't it? | Yes (it is). | Answer is same in both cases - because snow *is white*! | But notice change of **stress** when answerer does not agree with questioner. |
| Snow isn't white, is it? | **Yes** it **is**! |
| Snow is black, isn't it? | **No** it **isn't**! | Answer is same in both cases - because snow *is not black*! |
| Snow isn't black, is it? | No (it isn't). |

In some languages, people answer a question like "Snow isn't black, is it?" with "Yes" (meaning "Yes, I agree with you"). This is the **wrong answer** in English!

Here are some more examples, with correct answers:

* The moon goes round the earth, doesn't it? Yes, it does.
* The earth is bigger than the moon, isn't it? Yes.
* The earth is bigger than the sun, isn't it? **No**, it **isn't**!
* Asian people don't like rice, do they? **Yes**, they **do**!
* Elephants live in Europe, don't they? **No**, they **don't**!
* Men don't have babies, do they? No.
* The English alphabet doesn't have 40 letters, does it? No, it doesn't.

**Tag Question Special Cases**

**Negative adverbs**

The adverbs ***never*, *rarely*, *seldom*, *hardly*, *barely* and *scarcely***have a negative sense. Even though they may be in a positive statement, the feeling of the statement is negative. We treat statements with these words like negative statements, so the question tag is normally positive. Look at these examples:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **positive statement treated as *negative statement*** | **positive tag** |
| He **never** came again, | did he? |
| She can **rarely** come these days, | can she? |
| You **hardly** ever came late, | did you? |
| I **barely** know you, | do I? |
| You would **scarcely** expect her to know that, | would you? |

**Intonation**

We can change the *meaning* of a tag question with the musical pitch of our voice. With rising intonation, it sounds like a real question. But if our intonation falls, it sounds more like a statement that doesn't require a real answer:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **intonation** | |  |
| You don't know where my wallet is, | do you? | / rising | real question |
| It's a beautiful view, | isn't it? | \ falling | not a real question |

**Imperatives**

Sometimes we use question tags with imperatives (invitations, orders), but the sentence remains an imperative and does not require a direct answer. We use *won't* for invitations. We use ***can, can't, will, would***for orders.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **imperative + question tag** | ***notes*** |
| Take a seat, won't you? | polite invitation |
| Help me, can you? | quite friendly |
| Help me, can't you? | quite friendly (some irritation?) |
| Close the door, would you? | quite polite |
| Do it now, will you? | less polite |
| Don't forget, will you? | with negative imperatives only *will* is possible |

**Same-way tag questions**

Although the basic structure of tag questions is positive-negative or negative-positive, it is sometimes possible to use a positive-positive or negative-negative structure. We use same-way tag questions to express ***interest, surprise, anger*** etc, and not to make real questions.

Look at these positive-positive tag questions:

* So you're having a baby, are you? That's wonderful!
* She wants to marry him, does she? Some chance!
* So you think that's funny, do you? Think again.

Negative-negative tag questions usually sound rather hostile:

* So you don't like my looks, don't you? (British English)

**Asking for information or help**

Notice that we often use tag questions to ask for information or help, starting with a negative statement. This is quite a friendly/polite way of making a request. For example, instead of saying "Where is the police station?" (not very polite), or "Do you know where the police station is?" (slightly more polite), we could say: "You wouldn't know where the police station is, would you?" Here are some more examples:

* You don't know of any good jobs, do you?
* You couldn't help me with my homework, could you?
* You haven't got $10 to lend me, have you?

**Some more special cases**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **example** | **notes** |
| I **am** right, **are**n't I? | aren't I (*not* amn't I) |
| You **have** to go, **do**n't you? | you (do) have to go... |
| I **have been** answering, **have**n't I? | use first auxiliary |
| **Nothing** came in the post, **did** it? | treat statements with *nothing, nobody etc* like negative statements |
| **Let's** go, shall we? | *let's = let us* |
| He**'d** better do it, **had**n't he? | he had better (no auxiliary) |

**Mixed Examples of Tag Questions**

Here is a list of examples of tag questions in different contexts. Notice that some are "normal" and others seem to break all the rules:

* But you don't really love her, do you?
* This'll work, won't it?
* Oh you think so, do you?
* Well, I couldn't help it, could I?
* But you'll tell me if she calls, won't you?
* We'd never have known, would we?
* Oh you do, do you?
* The weather's bad, isn't it?
* You won't be late, will you?
* Nobody knows, do they?
* You never come on time, do you?
* You couldn't help me, could you?
* You think you're clever, do you?
* So you don't think I can do it, don't you? (British English)
* Shut up, will you!
* She can hardly love him after all that, can she?
* Nothing will happen, will it?

**Examples of Questions Tags**

* The weather is getting very hot, isn’t it?
* Paul can’t drive at night, can he?
* Maya would be able to bring the snacks for the party, won’t she?
* You have already completed your task, haven’t you?
* They have not been at the marriage yet, have they?
* He can swim in the river, can’t he?
* You would be needing an extra bag for the trip, won’t you?
* I guess her parents are too old to travel, aren’t they?
* You need to remember all the facts about the monument, won’t you?
* Luna basically belongs to Korea, doesn’t she?
* The Food is really tasty today, isn’t it?
* I think this music is heavy metal music, don’t you?
* John just topped in the entire university, didn’t he?
* I have heard that your brother paints really well, doesn’t he?
* You will be coming with us to the airport, aren’t you?
* You are residing in the west zone of the city, don’t you?
* Maya can’t speak Spanish, can she?
* You haven’t met Megha’s brother, have you?

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