

POLITENESS PRINCIPLE NUMBER 2

The Indirect Questions Principle

There are two parts to this principle:

1. Use indirect questions to sound more polite
2. Use question tags to sound more polite.

Question Tags (also called Tag questions)

These are very common in native speaker varieties of English.

You're hungry, aren't you?

You're Chinese, aren't you?

You've been to New York, haven't you?

You didn't like that, did you?

We put tags (aren't you? haven't you?) at the end of statements to make them more like questions. In many languages, you only need to say 'yes' or 'no'. at the end.

In English, we can also use the tag 'right'.

She works in a bank, right?

Using 'right' won't make you sound particularly polite though.

2 Main Features of Question Tags

- **Positive statement normally have negative tags and negative statement with positive tags.**
You're married, aren't you? You're not married, are you?
- **The intonation on the tag can rise or fall.**

Rising intonation suggests that you are asking for confirmation, you don't sound

as sure or certain.

This may make you sound more polite as it gives the other person the chance to correct you or provide you with the correct information

Falling intonation invites agreement and suggest the other person is going to answer yes.

This suggests certainty. Not really a question but more a way to get agreement.

This is fine if your intention is to start a conversation: *It's a lovely day, isn't it?*

Indirect questions will also make you sound more polite

If you ask a direct question, such as: *Where does she work?*, you can sound quite pushy and imposing. You are not giving your conversation partner much of an opportunity to say: *I'm sorry, I can't answer you. I'm busy.*

It puts the other person under pressure because they feel like they have to give you a direct answer and respond immediately.

If you don't know the other person well and want to sound more polite, give them options and the freedom to say no and not answer your question, it's a good idea to use indirect questions:

I was wondering if you knew where she worked?

Remember that indirect questions can sound too polite. If you know somebody well, they may prefer direct questions. They can sound formal and reserved rather than friendly.

Other indirect questions include:

Do you mind if....?

Would you mind if....?

Would you mind telling me...?

Indirect Questions can be too indirect!

If it's not too much to ask, I was wondering if you wouldn't mind telling me where she works? I'd be extremely grateful.

This is so polite that it will sound irritating and annoying to many people.

SUMMARY

Use question tags to sound more polite.

Question tags are normally formed with a combination of positive statement and negative tags or negative statements and positive tags.

A rising intonation suggests you want confirmation (less certain) whereas a falling intonation often invites agreement and are used to start conversations.

Indirect questions will help you sound more polite because they don't require an immediate and direct response.

However, indirect questions can irritate people if they are used too often or are too elaborate.