



Focus: How to ask questions confidently and clearly in English; using softening language; knowing when and how to speak up

Asking Questions in Group Settings



The English Hub

Welcome & Objectives

Asking questions in meetings shows you are engaged and thoughtful. But many learners feel shy or unsure how to ask a question politely. This lesson will help you become more confident, using English that is respectful, clear and professional.

Today, you will:

- Learn how to ask clear and respectful questions in a group
- Use grammar structures for indirect and polite questioning
- Practise asking follow-up, clarification, and opinion-seeking questions
- Build confidence speaking in group discussions

Warm-up Discussion:

How do you currently explain your job to someone from a different team?
Do you feel your job title clearly reflects your role?

Vocabulary – Useful Phrases for Questioning

Discuss the following terms with your tutor:

Phrase	Purpose
“Could I ask about...”	Polite softener for curiosity
“Would you mind explaining...”	Formal request for clarification
“May I ask if...”	Formal and respectful
“Just to clarify...”	Gentle interruption to confirm details
“What do you mean by...?”	Ask for definition

Your tutor will read out the following contexts. Choose the most suitable polite question starter from the list above:

1. During a presentation:

A colleague uses the term *customer churn rate*, and you’re not sure what it means.

2. Speaking with a client:

They mention a change in delivery timelines, but they don’t explain why.

Grammar – Indirect Questions

We use indirect questions to sound more polite in group settings.

Structure:

“Can you tell me + [subject + verb]?”

“Do you know + [subject + verb]?”

Direct: “Where is the report?”

Indirect: “Could you tell me where the report is?”

Task: Transform the following direct questions into indirect ones:

- **Where is the meeting room?**
- **Who is leading the workshop?**
- **When will the report be ready?**

Example:

“When does the project start?” → “Do you know when the project starts?”

Activity – Match the Tone

Task: Match the question to the setting: **casual**, **formal**, or **inappropriate**:

Question	Setting
“So... what’s going on here?”	Formal
“Could you walk us through the plan?”	Semi-formal
“Can I ask something real quick?”	Inappropriate

Task: Have a go at rephrasing the inappropriate example, to a polite and professional tone.

Listening Drill – Confidence & Intonation

Your tutor will read out the following three versions of the same question:

- “Um... could you maybe explain... how this affects... our timeline?”
- “Could you explain how this affects our timeline?”
- “Could you just explain how this is affecting the timeline?”

Task: Match each version to its tone:

- (1) Hesitant and quiet
- (2) Clear and professional
- (3) Rushed and unfocused

Then, discuss which tone would be most effective in a professional setting and explain why.

Grammar – Using “If” Clauses to Be Less Direct

Use **if clauses** to gently introduce your question or concern.

Examples:

- “I was wondering if you could explain...”
- “If I may ask, what are the next steps?”

Task: Use this structure to form work-based questions for the following:

Scenario:

You are in a team meeting about an upcoming product launch. The project manager has just explained the marketing plan, but you are unsure about the exact date for the first campaign email.

Roleplay – Asking in a Team Meeting

Scenario: Imagine you're in a team meeting with a colleague (played by the tutor) discussing a **new software tool** your company will start using.

Task: During the role play, discuss and include the following:

- **Ask for clarification** about something unclear in the colleague's explanation.
- **Ask a follow-up about deadlines** for when the tool will be ready to use.
- **Ask if you can get help with onboarding** to the new software.

Include:

- **At least one indirect**
- **At least one “if clause” question**



Reading Task – Q&A Session Transcript

Have a go at reading the following text to your tutor:

“Hi, thanks for the overview. I just had a quick question, could you clarify how this will affect the international teams?”

Discuss:

- What makes this question polite?
- Why is “just” useful here?

Task: Rephrase the following questions using “just” or “quick” for a soft tone.

“Can you confirm the deadline for this project?”

“Could you explain the new policy on expenses?”

“Can you send me the updated client list?”



Activity – Clarifying or Challenging?

Your tutor will read out the following questions:

- “When will the updated budget be available?”
- “Why didn’t the project meet the deadline?”
- “Could you explain the new client onboarding process?”
- “How come we didn’t get approval earlier?”
- “What steps should we take to avoid delays next time?”

Task: Decide if the questions are a clarification question or a challenge and explain why you think that way.

Discuss: How can we rephrase challenges more professionally?

Example:

“Why didn’t we plan better?” → “Could we discuss how the planning process worked?”

Grammar – Embedded Questions with “Whether”

Use **whether** when offering two options or outcomes.

Examples:

- “Do you know **whether** we’ll need to stay late?”
- “I’m not sure **whether** the update was final.”

Task: Form 2 embedded questions using ‘whether’ from your own work context.

Listening Practice – When to Ask

Your tutor will describe 3 workplace situations:

1. Your manager is showing slides to the whole team. They are speaking without pauses, but you have a question about one of the charts.
2. A colleague you need to speak to is making coffee in the break area. They don't seem busy but they're about to head into another meeting.
3. A teammate is wearing headphones and typing quickly on their laptop. You need to confirm one small detail for your report.

Discuss:

- Whether it's a good time to ask a question
- How you would politely interrupt (or wait)
- Emphasise listening and social timing, and discuss why you think this is appropriate

Activity – Fill in the Missing Phrases

Complete the questions below using polite and professional phrases:

- “_____ if this applies to remote teams too?”
- “I’m wondering _____ the priorities have changed.”
- “_____ you mind repeating the timeline?”

Task: Choose one question from above and relate it to your current job role.

Example:

“Would you mind emailing me a confirmation of the meeting for Friday?”

Grammar – Using “Just” and “A Bit” for Softening

We use softeners to make speech sound less demanding

Examples:

- “I just wanted to ask if...”
- “I’m a bit confused about...”

Task: Have a go at softening these direct questions:

- **Direct:** “Send me the updated report.”
- **Direct:** “When will you finish this task?”
- **Direct:** “I need this information today.”

Example:

Direct: “I need to know this now.” → “I’m just wondering if you could confirm...”

Roleplay – Asking at a Town Hall or All-Staff

Situation: Imagine you're in a Q&A with senior leadership.

Task: Build a short, clear question using:

- “Just”
- Indirect format
- Optional: embedded clause

Then speak it aloud with steady, calm pace.

Activity – Change the Direct Tone

Your tutor will read out the following blunt, direct questions:

- **“Why didn’t you finish the report?”**
- **“This doesn’t make sense.”**
- **“You’re wrong about the figures.”**

Task: Rephrase the questions in a professional tone:

Example: “Who made this mistake?” → “Could you clarify what happened during that step?”

Tip: Emphasise on saving face and professionalism.

Drill – “Excuse Me” Phrases

Scenario: Imagine you are in a project meeting. The team is reviewing a slide that shows the new marketing budget. You notice one figure that looks different from what was shared last week. You want to ask about it without interrupting too abruptly.

Complete the following entry lines you can use in this situation:

- “Excuse me, may I ask...”
- “Before we move on, I had one quick question...”
- “Just one point of clarification...”



Pronunciation – Stress in Polite Questions

Repeat the following sentences after your tutor, focusing on pronunciation and fluency:

“Could you please repeat that?”

“Would you mind explaining that again?”

Tip: Listen and mimic correct stress and polite emphasis



Mini Challenge – Your Voice in the Meeting

Task: Create a question about the following scenarios, you could ask in a real meeting you have coming up this week/month:

- About a deadline
- A responsibility change
- Project clarification

Tip: Give full context and question using indirect format

Reflection

Discuss:

Do you feel more nervous asking questions in person or in a group chat? Why?

What makes a question sound polite in writing (email, etc)?