

Forming Questions in French

There are many different ways of asking questions in French. The same question words that are in English also exist in French, but are used in different ways. The word order changes in French, and extra words that don't exist in English are added in some cases.

I. General Question Words

Below are the common question words we use in English with their French equivalents. We will examine examples of their usage in the 'Construction of Questions' section.

<u>English</u>	<u>French</u>
Who...?	Qui...?
What...?	Que...? Qu'est ce-que...?
Which...?	Quel(s)/quelle(s)...?
When...?	Quand...?
Where...?	Où...?
Why...?	Pourquoi...?
How... ?	Comment...?
How much...?	Combien...?

II. Construction of Questions

1. 'Est-ce que'

In English, we use auxiliary verbs (e.g. do, be, have) to ask questions. For example, 'Has my phone arrived?'. In French, these verbs are replaced with a simple construction, 'Est-ce que'. 'Est-ce que' is one of the constructions that show us the sentence is a question.

Examples:

Do they go swimming often? **Est-ce qu'**ils font souvent de la natation?

Are you going out today? **Est-ce que** tu sors aujourd'hui?

Have we got any butter? **Est-ce que** nous avons du beurre?

2. 'Qu'est-ce que'

'Qu'est-ce que' is one way of asking 'What?' in French. It is quite easy to remember because it is the question construction 'est-ce que' with 'que' (what) added on the front of the word.

Example:

What are you doing today? **Qu'est-ce que** tu fais aujourd'hui?

3. 'Que'

'Que' may be used to ask 'What ?' in French, but it can sound very formal to native French speakers. If you do decide to use 'que' instead of 'qu'est-ce que', this is how a typical question would be formed:

What are you doing? **Que** fais-tu?

Notice that the verb (in red) is *before* the subject pronoun (in green) when 'est-ce que' is omitted.

4. 'Quel(s)/quelle(s)'

'Quel' (masculine) or 'quelle' (feminine) means 'Which?'. However, it is sometimes used when we would say 'What?' in English. 'Quel' refers to nouns and adjectives, whereas 'que' or 'qu'est-ce que' refer to verbs.

Compare:

'**Qu'est-ce que** nous **étudions** aujourd'hui?' (**What** are we **studying** today?)

'**Quel** temps fait-il?' (**What** is the weather like?)

The spelling changes depending on gender and number. If you are asking about a plural noun 'quel' becomes 'quels', or 'quelle' becomes 'quelles' if the noun is feminine and plural.

Examples:

Masc. Singular: **Quel** est ton film préféré? **What** is your favourite film?

Masc. Plural: **Quels** sont les dangers de l'alcool? **What** are the dangers of alcohol?

Fem. Singular: **Quelle** est ta matière préférée? **What** is your favourite subject?

Fem. Plural: **Quelles** sont tes raisons d'être en retard? **What** are your reasons for being late ?

5. 'Qui'

The way we ask 'Who?' is by using 'qui'. Its use is very similar to our use in English. 'Qui' is followed by the verb in the correct tense *without* the use of 'est-ce que'.

Who wants to read my book? **Qui** veut lire mon livre?

6. 'Quand'

'Quand' is the French meaning of 'When?'. When we want to use 'quand' we usually add 'est-ce que' to highlight that we are asking a question.

Example:

When do they normally go to the park? **Quand est-ce qu'**ils vont au parc normalement?

When we just want to use 'when' in a sentence, we have no need of 'est-ce que' because we are not really asking a question.

Example:

I am always there **when** you need me. Je suis toujours la **quand** tu as besoin de moi.

If you want to sound more formal, you can use 'quand' without 'est-ce que' and invert the verb and subject pronoun (as we did in the section on 'qu'est-ce que'.

Example:

When do you need me? **Quand avez-vous** besoin de moi?

7. Où?

'Où', meaning 'Where?', is also usually followed by 'est-ce que' to show that it is a question.

Example:

Where are we going this weekend ? **Où est-ce que** nous allons ce weekend?

It can also be used without 'est-ce que'. You would normally see it without 'est-ce que' in short questions or in more formal usage.

Example:

Where are you? **Où êtes-vous?**

Again, 'est-ce que' is not included when we use 'where' in a sentence.

Example:

Here is the library **where** I work. Voici la bibliothèque **où** je travaille.

8. 'Pourquoi?'

'Pourquoi' means 'Why?'. We also use 'est-ce que' with this question.

Example:

Why doesn't he tell the truth ? **Pourquoi est-ce qu'il** ne dit pas la vérité?

When asked 'Pourquoi ?', we reply with 'parce que' (which means 'because').

He doesn't tell the truth **because** he is a liar. Il ne dit pas la vérité **parce qu'il** est menteur.

Formal questions without 'est-ce que' would look like this:

Why do you work in this office? Pourquoi **travaillez-vous** dans ce bureau?

9. 'Comment ?'

'Comment' means 'How?'. It can be used with or without 'est-ce que'.

Examples:

How do you spell that ? **Comment** cela s'écrit?

How are you going to the airport ? **Comment** est-ce que tu vas à l'aéroport?

~ ~ ~ ~ **Comment** **vas-tu** à l'aéroport ?

10. 'Combien?'

'Combien' is used to ask 'How much?' or 'How many?' This is often used when asking for the price of something or the quantity of something.

Examples:

How much does a mobile phone cost? **Combien** coute un téléphone portable?

How many books are there in your room ? **Combien** de livres est-ce qu'il y a dans ta chambre ?

Notice how 'est-ce que' is used when we are talking about a quantity of a noun here. Also notice how 'de' is added after 'combien' when there is a noun directly after the question.

- 'Combien' with 'de' is for when there is a noun following the question.
- 'Combien' without 'de' is for when there is a verb following the question.

Multiple Choice Questions:

1. How do we ask 'Why?' in French?
 - a) Comment?
 - b) Pourquoi?
 - c) Parce que
 - d) Qu'est-ce que?

2. What is the equivalent of 'est-ce que' in English?
 - a) What?
 - b) When?
 - c) How?
 - d) The auxiliary verbs : Do/Be/Have

3. What is the difference between 'que' and 'qu'est-ce que'?
 - a) There is no difference
 - b) 'Qu'est-ce que' is more formal than 'que'
 - c) 'Que' is more formal than 'qu'est-ce que'
 - d) They are two different questions

4. What is the French word for 'Which'?
 - a) Que?
 - b) Quel(s)/quelle(s)?
 - c) Comment?
 - d) Combien?

5. How do we say 'because'?
 - a) Parce que
 - b) Pourquoi ?
 - c) Qui ?
 - d) Où ?

6. Which of the options below is grammatically correct?

- a) Quel est ta matière préférée?
- b) Quelle temps fait-il?
- c) Quelle heure est-il?
- d) All of the above

7. Which of the options below is incorrect?

- a) Combien de pommes est-ce que vous avez?
- b) Qui est Claire?
- c) Que tu fais?
- d) None of the above

8. What is the meaning of 'Combien?'?

- a) Who?
- b) When?
- c) How?
- d) How much?

9. Which question word changes because of gender and number?

- a) Que?
- b) Quoi?
- c) Quel?
- d) Qui?

10. What is the French for 'How?'

- a) Comment?
- b) Combien?
- c) Où ?
- d) Quand?

Answers:

1 B / 2 D / 3 C / 4 B / 5 A / 6 C / 7 C / 8 D / 9 C / 10 A