

7.2 TAG QUESTIONS

7.2A Tag questions are the short questions which we often attach to the end of a sentence. We form tag questions with *do/does/did* (in simple tenses), or the auxiliary verb. There are three main types of sentence + tag question:

| | type | sentence | tag question |
|-----------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------|
| mixed tag questions | affirmative + negative tag | <i>You already know Harriet,</i> | <i>don't you?</i> |
| | negative + affirmative tag | <i>She hasn't had the baby yet,</i> | <i>has she?</i> |
| uniform tag questions | affirmative + affirmative tag | <i>He arrived last night then,</i> | <i>did he?</i> |

If an affirmative sentence contains a negative or 'restrictive' adverb (e.g. *scarcely*, *hardly* ▶ 6.3A), it takes an affirmative tag:

There was hardly enough food for everyone at the wedding, was there?

Most modal verbs, like auxiliary verbs, are repeated in the tag question:

Tax returns can be submitted on-line now, can't they?

Parents shouldn't expect their children to agree with their opinions, should they?

7.2B There are a number of exceptions and variations in the form of the verb in tag questions:
Form (exceptions and variations)

| tag questions after ... | example |
|---------------------------|---|
| <i>I am</i> | <i>I'm still part of the team, aren't I?</i> |
| <i>need</i> (negative) | <i>He doesn't need to repeat the year, does he?</i> (or: <i>He needn't repeat the year, need he?</i>) |
| <i>may/might</i> | <i>It may/might be fine tomorrow, mightn't it?</i> |
| <i>ought to</i> | <i>We really ought to leave now, oughtn't we?/shouldn't we?</i> |
| <i>Let's</i> | <i>Let's try that new restaurant, shall we?</i> |

Note the following contrasts:

| | |
|-------------------------------|--|
| <i>have</i> (British English) | <i>Oliver has a lot of friends, hasn't he?/doesn't he?</i> |
| <i>have</i> (US English) | <i>Oliver has a lot of friends, doesn't he?</i> |
| <i>had</i> (past simple) | <i>All and Stefan had another baby last year, didn't they?</i> |
| <i>had</i> (past perfect) | <i>You had met him before this evening, hadn't you?</i> |

Generally the pronoun in the tag question matches the subject of the sentence:

This is a good example, isn't it? (*This* and *it* are both singular.)

Those are the flowers for Mum, aren't they? (*Those* and *they* are both plural.)

Nothing ever happens when I'm away, does it?

But notice these exceptions:

Someone's been taking my food again, haven't they?

Nobody has phoned, have they?

7.2C We use mixed tag questions with a falling intonation, to ask for confirmation:
Use *It's the first of May today, isn't it?* ↘ (The speaker believes that this is true and uses a tag question to check.)

With a rising intonation, mixed tag questions are a genuine request for information:

You haven't talked to Jim yet, have you? ↗

We use uniform question tags (affirmative sentence + affirmative tag) to respond to something we have heard/seen, as in echo questions (▶ 7.4B):

'I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to cancel this evening. I'm still at work.'

'Oh, things are still really hectic, are they?' ↗ (expressing sympathy)

Ⓛ Be careful with this type of tag, as with a rising intonation it can express sarcasm:
'Look. I only paid \$120 for this dress – it was so cheap!' *'Oh, \$120 is cheap, is it?'*

We answer mixed tag questions in the following way:

- Affirmative tag: *'John isn't experienced enough to do this job, is he?'*
'No, I don't think he is.' (agreement)/*'Actually, yes, he is.'* (contradiction)
- Negative tag: *'You're staying away for two weeks, aren't you?'*
'Yes, that's right.' (agreement)/*'No, it's three weeks.'* (contradiction)

7.2D We can also use tag questions for requests:
 Other functions of tag questions
You'll bring me back some of those lovely sausages, won't you?
You couldn't bring me back some of those lovely sausages, could you?

The choice of tag question after imperatives depends on the function of the sentence:

- Requests: *Pick me up at eight, could you?*
- Invitations: *Stay another night with us, won't you?*
- Commands: *Turn the TV off, will you? Don't annoy Rufus, will you?*



TASKS:

2 7.2

Complete each question with an appropriate question tag.

- 1 You'll be able to watch the children for half an hour while I fetch John from work,
- 2 'I hope you're not doing anything tonight. I've just booked tickets for the circus.' 'Oh, there were tickets left,? I thought it would have sold out.'
- 3 The Consul had been quite cooperative up to this point,
- 4 We needn't register before the first talk,
- 5 Be a good girl and pop to the shops for me,? We're completely out of cheese.
- 6 How can you think of marrying her? You've hardly known her five minutes,
- 7 No one was staffing the west turnstile at the time of the accident,

3

Rewrite each question to make it less direct, but so that it is as similar in meaning as possible to the original question. Begin with the phrases given.

- 0 Who is responsible for street cleaning in this area?
 Could you tell me *who is responsible for street cleaning in this area?*
- 1 Why did it take you so long to deliver this parcel?
 I'd like to know
- 2 Has Harriet finished the minutes of the meeting yet or not?
 Can you tell me if
- 3 Why do you keep so many old cars outside your house?
 Could I possibly ask you
- 4 When will the new curtains for the hotel suites be ready?
 Please let me know
- 5 Will Jonathan be staying for dinner tomorrow evening?
 I'd like to know whether

4

Complete B's questions with appropriate verbs and/or question words as necessary. The questions should ask about the underlined parts of A's sentences.

- 0 A: Come on! I've been waiting out in the cold for ages!
 B: Oh, really? *How long* exactly have you been waiting?
- 1 A: Someone told me that you've decided to give up the course.
 B: Oh, that?
- 2 A: Do you like tabbouleh? I've got some here.
 B: Do I? I've never even heard of it!
- 3 A: The new Mayor of London has decided to charge cars to go into the city.
 B:? Good. I thought he'd never do anything about the congestion.
- 4 A: I've just been offered two jobs!
 B: That's great! to take?
- 5 A: We went to a comedy night at the local pub yesterday, and saw some really good comedians.
 B: Oh, see?