

Indirect questions

— INDIREKTE FRAGEN

Indirect questions are questions asked in a roundabout, embedded way instead of directly: ob, wo, wann, wie.

“Weißt du, wo ist der Bahnhof?” — that is a mistake in German. The question order has to go, and the verb moves to the very end.

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01 00:10

Right now: two kinds of question, two routes



SHORTCUT

If the question has a **W-word**, that word becomes the **conjunction** (wo · wann · wie · warum). If it does not, you insert **ob**. Either way, the verb goes to the end.

DIRECT QUESTION	INDIRECT VERSION	WHAT CHANGED
Wo ist der Bahnhof?	Ich weiß nicht, wo der Bahnhof ist.	the verb moved to the end
Wann kommt er?	Weißt du, wann er kommt?	the verb moved to the end
Kommt er heute?	Ich weiß nicht, ob er heute kommt.	ob added + verb to the end

The third row is the critical one: a yes/no question **has no conjunction**, so German **supplies one** — **ob**. It is the counterpart of English “whether” (or “if”, when it means “whether”).

02 01:10

English already does this

English also **changes the structure** when it tucks a question inside a sentence: the question order goes back to normal, and *do/does* disappears. German does the same job, just with a different tool.

DIRECT	EMBEDDED	GERMAN
Where does he live?	I don't know where he lives .	Ich weiß nicht , wo er wohnt .
Is he coming?	I don't know whether he's coming .	Ich weiß nicht , ob er kommt .
When will he come?	I don't know when he will come .	Ich weiß nicht , wann er kommt .

The second row — “**whether**” — is the exact counterpart of German **ob**. Once you make that link, **ob** is hard to forget. The difference: in German the verb also travels to the very end.

03 02:00

Two places where it goes wrong



TRAP 1

Using wenn instead of ob

The **single most important line on this page**. English “if” covers both meanings, so they blur together, but in German they are two completely different words:

WORD	WHAT IT MEANS	EXAMPLE
ob	whether — a question	Ich weiß nicht , ob er kommt . — I don't know whether he's coming
wenn	if / when — a condition	Ich freue mich , wenn er kommt . — I'll be happy if he comes

Both send the verb to the end, so the sentence still **works grammatically** — the mistake is invisible, but **the meaning changes completely**. One of the sneakiest errors there is.

✗ Ich weiß nicht, ~~wenn~~ er kommt.

That reads like “I don't know in case he comes” — it makes no sense.

✓ Ich weiß nicht, **ob** er kommt.

I don't know whether he's coming.

Test: swap the English. If “**whether**” fits, it is **ob**; if only “if” (as in “provided that”) fits, it is **wenn**.



TRAP 2

Keeping the question order

In a direct question the verb moves to the front. When you switch to the indirect form, this is **undone** — learners copy the question order as it is.

✗ **Ich weiß nicht, wann ~~kommt~~ er.**

The question order stayed.

✓ **Ich weiß nicht, wann **er kommt**.**

I don't know when he's coming.

✓ **Können Sie mir sagen, wo der Bahnhof **ist**?**

Can you tell me where the station is?

With a separable verb, the two parts **join up at the end**: **Ich weiß nicht, wann der Zug **abfährt****. If there is a modal verb, the modal goes last: **..., ob ich kommen **kann****.

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04 03:40

Where the question mark goes

A small detail, but one that shows up in written exams: **the main clause decides the punctuation**, not the question tucked inside it.

SENTENCE	MARK	WHY
Ich weiß nicht, ob er kommt.	full stop	the main clause is a statement
Weißt du, ob er kommt?	question mark	the main clause is a question
Können Sie mir sagen, wo der Bahnhof ist?	question mark	the main clause is a question

The structure inside is the same in all three rows. The only thing that changes is whether **the opening clause** is a question.

The phrases that introduce an indirect question are a short list, and every one of them is useful: **Ich weiß nicht, ...** · **Weißt du, ...** · **Können Sie mir sagen, ...** · **Ich frage mich, ...** · **Es ist unklar, ...**

05 04:20

The part nobody tells you: it is a politeness tool

Textbooks file this topic under “joining sentences”. For someone living in Germany its real job is different: **this is the normal way to ask a stranger a question.**

DIRECT (BLUNT)	INDIRECT (NORMAL)	WHERE
Wo ist der Bahnhof?	Können Sie mir sagen , wo der Bahnhof ist?	on the street
Wann kommt der Bus?	Wissen Sie , wann der Bus kommt?	at the bus stop
Haben Sie das?	Ich wollte fragen , ob Sie das haben .	in a shop

The sentences on the left are **not wrong** — grammatically flawless. But asked like that to a stranger in Germany, they come across a notch too blunt. The form on the right is **both correct and safe.**

Here is the trick: you **postpone the hard part of the sentence**. Saying **Können Sie mir sagen, ...** buys you half a second while you pull the rest together. It is a real technique for cutting down those frozen moments when you speak — read it alongside [the page on freezing moments](#).

The second thing nobody mentions: **ob** is not only for indirect questions. **It can start a sentence on its own**, and then it means “I wonder if ...”: **Ob er heute kommt?** — I wonder if he’s coming today. Germans use this a lot when thinking out loud.

06 04:55

What to do this week

This topic sticks when you **ask the question twice**. Five minutes a day:

- Write five direct questions: **Wo ist ...? Wann kommt ...? Wie viel kostet ...?**
- Rebuild each one with **Können Sie mir sagen, ...** — **throw the verb to the end.**
- Then write three yes/no questions and embed them with **ob**: **Ich weiß nicht, ob ...**
- Check every **ob** sentence in English: can you say **“whether”**?
- Once a week, write a **wenn** sentence and an **ob** sentence side by side — see the difference in meaning in your own sentences.

① Next up is [the second meaning of modal verbs](#): why **Er muss krank sein** does not mean “he has to get sick”.

07 BUILD

Build the sentence yourself

Tap the words and put them in order. This is the hardest part of German — and there are no options to pick from, **you** build it.

TAP THE WORDS

TAP THE WORDS

TAP THE WORDS

07 05:10

Test yourself

Tap an answer — we will look at why together.

+7

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