



B2 —

Asking for Clarification Without Sounding Incompetent

Tone: Corporate | Professional | Calmly Confident

Context: Meetings, emails, decision-making,
collaboration with native speakers

Lesson aim

By the end of this lesson, the student will be able to:

- Ask for clarification without appearing unsure or unprepared,
- Select the most appropriate question type for professional situations,
- Communicate confidently in meetings with native English speakers.



Warm-up discussion

Discuss briefly:

1. In professional meetings, when do you hesitate to ask questions?
2. Do you think asking *too few* questions can be more damaging than asking *too many*?
3. What makes a question sound professional rather than insecure?



Common Question Words

[And Their Use Cases]

Who

Use: to ask about a **person as the subject** (who performs the action).

Examples:

- *Who approved the transaction?*
- *Who is responsible for final sign-off?*
- *Who raised this concern initially?*
- *Who will be attending the review meeting?*
- *Who has the authority to make this decision?*

✓ Focuses on responsibility and action.

⚠ Often used informally even when whom is technically correct.

Whom

Use: to ask about a **person as the object** (who receives the action).

Examples:

- *Whom did you contact regarding the discrepancy?*
- *To whom should this be escalated?*
- *Whom are we expecting approval from?*
- *With whom did you discuss this matter?*
- *For whom is this report intended?*

✓ Most common after prepositions.

🧠 Test: answer with him / her / them → whom fits.

⚠ Spoken English often prefers who, even when whom is correct.

What

Use: to ask about **things, actions, or information.**

Examples:

- *What triggered the review?*
- *What does this process involve?*
- *What are the next steps?*
- *What impact could this have on our exposure?*
- *What information are we still missing?*

✓ Very flexible.

⚠ Can sound abrupt if not softened.

Where

Use: to ask about **location, stage, or responsibility.**

Examples:

- *Where does this fall within our approval process?*
- *Where is the request currently sitting?*
- *Where did the delay occur?*
- *Where should this be documented?*
- *Where does Compliance fit into this decision?*

✓ Often metaphorical in corporate English.

When

Use: to ask about **time, deadlines, or sequence.**

Examples:

- *When was this issue first identified?*
- *When is the review expected to conclude?*
- *When do we need final approval?*
- *When was the client informed?*
- *When should we revisit this decision?*

✓ Essential for planning and coordination.

Why

Use: to ask about **reasons** or **causes**.

Examples:

- *Why was this account flagged?*
- *Why was an alternative approach taken?*
- *Why has this been escalated now?*

⚠ Can sound accusatory

✓ Common professional softening:

- *Could you explain why this occurred?*
- *I'd like to understand why this decision was made.*

How

Use: to ask about **process, method, or manner.**

Examples:

- *How was this assessment carried out?*
- *How do we plan to mitigate the risk?*
- *How was this issue identified?*
- *How does this align with current policy?*
- *How should this be communicated to the client?*

✓ Very common in technical and procedural discussions.

How much / How many

Use: to ask about **quantity** or **volume**.

Examples:

- *How much exposure are we facing?*
- *How many transactions are affected?*
- *How much time will this require?*
- *How many stakeholders are involved?*

✓ Much = uncountable | Many = countable.

How long

Use: to ask about **duration**.

Examples:

- *How long does the approval process usually take?*
- *How long has this issue been ongoing?*
- *How long do we expect the review to last?*

✓ Useful for timelines and expectations.

How often

Use: to ask about **frequency**.

Examples:

- *How often are these checks performed?*
- *How often does this situation occur?*
- *How often is this policy reviewed?*

✓ Common in audits, controls, and reporting.

Which

Use: to ask about a **choice from a limited set.**

Examples:

- *Which option would you recommend?*
- *Which department is responsible for this?*
- *Which cases are affected by this change?*
- *Which approach carries less risk?*

✓ More precise and controlled than what.

Whose

Use: to ask about **ownership or responsibility**.

Examples:

- *Whose responsibility is this at this stage?*
- *Whose approval are we still waiting for?*
- *Whose decision was this ultimately?*

✓ Very useful for accountability conversations.

What kind of ... / What type of ...

Use: to ask about **classification or category**.

Examples:

- *What type of risk are we dealing with?*
- *What kind of controls are currently in place?*
- *What type of approval is required here?*
- *What kind of impact could this have?*

✓ Sounds analytical and professional.

What happened if ...

Use: to ask about **consequences** or **hypothetical scenarios**.

Examples:

- *What happens if approval is delayed?*
- *What happens if the indicators change?*
- *What happens if the client disagrees?*
- *What happens if this is not escalated?*

✓ Excellent for risk management and planning.

Language Focus:

Question Types for Professional Clarification

Closed questions (Yes / No questions)

Used to **confirm understanding quickly** or **check facts without interrupting the flow of a meeting**.

Examples:

- *Is this the final version of the report?*
- *Are we required to report this under current regulations?*
- *Has this already been approved by Compliance?*
- *Can we proceed with this transaction today?*
- *Does this apply to all clients or only high-risk accounts?*

Best for:

- confirmation
- deadlines
- decisions
- factual checks

 Risk if overused: may sound abrupt if not softened with tone.

YES

NO



Open-ended questions (Wh- questions)

Used to **invite explanation, background, or reasoning**. These signal engagement rather than uncertainty.

Examples:

- *How was this risk assessment conducted?*
- *What led to this decision?*
- *Why was this account flagged at this stage?*
- *Which factors were considered during the review?*
- *How does this process differ from previous cases?*

Best for:

- understanding processes
- reasoning
- gaining context

⚠ Tip: allow the speaker time to answer fully.



Alternate questions

Used to **structure choices** and guide the discussion in a controlled way.

Examples:

- *Should we escalate this now, or review it internally first?*
- *Do we address this at team level or involve senior management?*
- *Is the priority risk mitigation or operational efficiency here?*

Best for:

- meetings
- decision-making
- narrowing options

This type sounds decisive and professional.



Question tags

Used to **confirm shared understanding politely** or invite agreement.

Examples:

- *This still falls under Compliance, doesn't it?*
- *We're aligned on the deadline, aren't we?*
- *The client has already been informed, hasn't he?*
- *This wouldn't require escalation at this stage, would it?*

Best for:

- reassurance
- soft confirmation
- maintaining rapport

⚠ Common learner issue: incorrect auxiliary or polarity.





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“A Fair Price for the Prints”

— Question tags dialogue



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Rhetorical questions

Used to **emphasise a point** or **steer thinking**. No answer is expected.

Examples:

- *Do we really want to proceed without full approval?*
- *Who benefits if we delay this decision further?*
- *Isn't risk management about prevention rather than reaction?*

Best for:

- persuasion
- emphasis
- highlighting risk

Used sparingly, they sound confident and strategic.



Indirect questions

Used to sound **polite, professional, and measured**, especially with senior stakeholders.

Examples:

- *Could you clarify how this decision was reached?*
- *I'd like to understand why this account was flagged.*
- *Would you mind explaining how this policy applies here?*
- *May I ask what prompted this change?*

Best for:

- formal settings
- senior colleagues
- sensitive topics

⚠ Key grammar point: statement word order after the question word.



Negative questions

Used to **check assumptions**, **express surprise**, or **highlight inconsistencies diplomatically**.

Examples:

- *Wasn't this already approved last quarter?*
- *Isn't this covered under the existing policy?*
- *Didn't we agree on a different approach previously?*

Best for:

- checking expectations
- addressing contradictions carefully

Tone is essential here.



Embedded questions

Used to sound **structured**, **diplomatic**, and **authoritative**. Common in meetings and presentations.

Examples:

- *What I'd like to clarify is how we plan to mitigate this risk.*
- *The key question is whether this approach is sustainable.*
- *One point we need to address is how this affects our exposure.*
- *What remains unclear is whether escalation is required.*

Best for:

- formal meetings
- presentations
- summarising concerns

This is high-level B2 moving into C1 territory.



“Just to Clarify”

Martin had been working at the bank for nearly five years, and yet moments like this still made him pause. The meeting had moved quickly, and several native English speakers were already debating the next steps.

“The exposure seems manageable,” one colleague said, *“assuming the secondary controls are applied.”* Martin nodded, but internally he hesitated. He understood most of the discussion, but the phrase secondary controls felt vague. He waited for a pause.

“Just to make sure I’ve understood correctly,” he said, *“when you refer to secondary controls, are we talking about enhanced monitoring measures?”* “Yes,” his colleague replied, *“additional oversight during the next review cycle.”*

Encouraged, Martin continued. *“And this wouldn’t require immediate escalation, would it?”* “No,” another colleague answered, *“not unless the indicators change.”*

Later, Martin added, “What I’d like to clarify is whether this approach has been applied successfully in similar cases.” The discussion moved forward smoothly. Martin hadn’t interrupted unnecessarily, and he hadn’t sounded uncertain. He had simply ensured clarity.

Reading comprehension questions

General understanding:

1. Why does Martin hesitate initially?
2. What is unclear to him during the meeting?
3. How do his colleagues respond to his questions?

Language focus:

1. Identify one indirect questions in the text.
2. Find one example of a questions tag.
3. Which sentence contains an embedded question?

Reflection:

1. Does Martin sound confident? Why?
2. Would you feel comfortable using similar language at work?



Controlled practice

Rewrite the direct questions so they sound more professional:

1. *What do you mean by this?*

→ _____

2. *Why did this happen?*

→ _____

3. *Is this my responsibility or yours?*

→ _____



Freer practice (role play)

Scenario:

You are in a meeting discussing a delayed transaction. Some terminology is unclear.

Task:

- Ask at least three clarification questions
- Use three different question types
- Maintain a calm, professional tone

Wrap-up reflection

1. Which question type feels safest for you?
2. Which would you like to practise more in future lessons?





Thank you for your support.

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