

If or whether?

If and whether: indirect questions

We can use *if* or *whether* to report indirect yes-no questions and questions with *or*. *If* is more common than *whether*:

*Call the bakeries around town and find out **if** any of them sell raspberry pies.*

*I rang Peter from the station and asked **if** I could drop in to see him before going back or **if** he'd meet me.*

We often prefer *whether* in more formal contexts:

*The teachers will be asked **whether** they would recommend the book to their classes.*

[from a business meeting]

*John read a letter that he'd written and the board discussed **whether** it should be mailed.*

We prefer *whether* with *or* when there is more than one alternative in the indirect question:

*After the election, we asked **whether** the parties should change their leaders, their policies, **or** both.*

To express an alternative, we can use *or not* with *if* and *whether*. With *whether* we can use *or not* immediately after *whether* or in end position. With *if* we use *or not* in end position only:

*I called Bill to find out **whether or not** he really did go to Afghanistan.*

*I called Bill to find out **whether** he really did go to Afghanistan **or not**.*

*I called Bill to find out **if** he really did go to Afghanistan **or not**.*

We use *whether* and not *if* before a *to*-infinitive, often when we're referring to future plans or decisions:

*I was wondering **whether** to go for a swim.*

Some financial decisions, such as planning a pension, need to be taken as early as possible.

*Others, such as **whether** to move house, can probably only be made much later.*

Whether not if

We use *whether* and not *if* after prepositions:

*Later I argued with the doctor about **whether** I had hit my head, since I couldn't remember feeling it.*

Not: ~~Later I argued with the doctor about if I had hit my head ...~~

*The police seemed mainly interested in **whether** there were any locks on the windows.*

Not: ~~The police seemed mainly interested in if there were any locks ...~~

I doubt if, I don't know whether

We use *if* or *whether* to introduce clauses after verbs of doubting:

*I don't know **if** I can drive. My foot really hurts.*

*I didn't prune the rose bush this year so I doubt **if** we're going to have many flowers.*

*We'll have plenty of photographs to show you but I'm not sure **whether** we'll be able to learn very much from them.*

If, whether: typical errors

- We use *whether*, not *if*, before *to*-infinitives:

*I don't know **whether** to buy the blue one or the red one.*

Not: ~~I don't know if to buy the blue one ...~~

- We use *whether*, not *if*, directly before *or not*:

*Can you tell me **whether or not** you're interested in the job.*

Not: ~~Can you tell me if or not you're interested ...~~

- We use *whether*, not *if*, after prepositions:

[talking about a trip to Australia for a year]

*We're not interested in **whether** we get great jobs and that kind of thing, we just want to have a good time.*

Not: ~~We're not interested in if we get great jobs and that kind of thing ...~~