

Twenty Little Words: Auxiliary Verbs Are Simply There To Help.

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Abstract:

For the past ten years, I have been using a basic framework to help my students grasp question and answer structures. I find that this enables them to develop their language skills quickly and increases their confidence in their conversational ability. Without mastering questions, learners can't even get to first base in terms of making a conversation on their own, let alone decipher the meaning of English that they hear or read, whether in print, film or on the internet.

The key to handling question and answer forms correctly lies in an understanding of auxiliary verbs. Teachers need to show learners how to use these verbs in a clear and systematic way in order to enable them to become more fluent English speakers as fast as possible.

A simple framework

My simplified framework, which includes all basic English questions, began with ideas from V F Allen's *Inside English*, which focuses on the 20 basic 'green or go words', the most common English auxiliary verbs (also known as 'helping and being' verbs). These verbs are called 'green' as they make English grammar function, and 'go verbs', as their position usually changes from the end (in a statement) to the beginning (in a question). For example, the initial auxiliary verb in the question '*Are there any people swimming in the pool today?*' goes to the end of the answer, '*Yes, there are.*'

All the English 'helping', 'being' and 'Wh-question' words are easy to teach, if isolated and presented in a basic framework. It is also easy for students to remember that all 'helping and being' verbs are used to begin yes/no questions, but go to the end of sentences in answers.

When we combine these 20 auxiliary verbs with the seven common 'Wh- question' words (*who, what, why, when, where, which* and *how*), students are learning to master all of the question words used in the entire English language. Almost all English questions begin either with one of these 20 auxiliary verbs, or with one of the seven question words (the exceptions are tag and rhetorical questions). The knowledge that there are only 27 essential question words, 12 main verb tense forms, and 35 most common prepositions helps to give students (and even teachers!) much more confidence in speaking and listening. This is because half of the structures involved in successfully negotiating conversations deal with being able to use and respond appropriately to various questioning techniques and formats.

The essential points to keep in mind are as follows:

- 1 Only twenty words form questions that can be answered with *Yes* or *No*.
- 2 These crucial *auxiliary verbs* bring time or tense to a sentence. They appear either when the sentence is made negative, made emphatic, or when it is turned into a question. (Only auxiliaries *be, being* and *been* are NOT used in this way.)
- 3 The auxiliary verbs may be put into two families, as shown here; this is where *-ing* rules must first be taught.

Simple framework of 20 basic auxiliary verbs used in questions

'Being' verbs: Rule: These five take *-ing* when used with a main verb:

am, is, are, was, were.

'Helping' verbs:

*have do
has did
had does*

Rule: These do NOT take *-ing* when used with a main verb:

*may can shall will
might could should would
must*

4 These verbs all follow consistent patterns of usage. It is essential to learn these patterns.

5 These auxiliary verbs have two potential slots, and all that comes between these slots forms the subject of a sentence, which may then be reduced to a subject pronoun.

The following chart lists various uses of 15 helping verbs, plus *ought*, which is not on the list above but functions similarly to *should*, though normally with an infinitive with *to*. You might like to photocopy this and give it to your students as a helpful reference.

'HELPING VERBS'

MODAL	EXPRESSION
Shall & will	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forms simple future tense • Resolve • Promise • Question • Request • Condition • Obligation
Should	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Probability • Futurity • Polite statement • Polite request • Preference
Would	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intention • Probability • Doubt • Possibility
May	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Desire • Permission • Often used interchangeably with <i>may</i>
Might	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Possibility (tenuous) • Permission (tenuous) • Polite alternative to <i>may</i>
Can	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability • Possibility • Possibility (tenuous)
Could	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Permission (tenuous) • Polite form of <i>can</i>
Must	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Necessity
Ought	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Duty • Moral obligation

Simple games

Of course, to be able to ask questions about almost anything, students must also learn how to use the seven basic question words, as well as the sense verbs (feel, think, see, hear, smell, taste, touch) plus a certain amount of common, core high-frequency vocabulary.

Here are some speaking practice games which I use to help my students with question forms.

1 Baseball English

Simply draw a baseball diamond, either on the board for class use or on paper for pair practice.

The object is to get 'runs' batted in. Forming four questions in a row correctly moves an individual or team's player around the bases to score a 'home run.' The partner or opposite side must first answer each question before making their own using other auxiliary verbs or "Wh-question" words.

2 Beanbag

In this game, which helps learners practise and produce auxiliary verb and 'Wh-questions', partners or teams of players call out someone's name while tossing a bean bag (commonly made as a craft in Japan), or other soft object, such as an eraser or ping pong ball to them. They then ask a question using one of the 27 question words.

3 Scramble

This is a game for one or more players. Place a series of cards, some with questions, some with the corresponding answers on them, face up in front of the players. Mix the questions and answers thoroughly. When the teacher gives a signal, students pull out matching pairs and place them in front of them. The student with the most pairs wins.

4 Find your partner

Each student has a card with either a question or an answer on it. When the teacher gives a signal, students mingle and say what is on their card to other students. When they find their partner (the person with the answer to their question or vice versa) they go to the teacher and say their question and answer aloud. Students should not show each other their cards. The aim is to *say* their question or answer.

5 Concentration

Lay a series of question and answer cards face down on a table. One student turns over two cards at a time. If they are a matching question and answer, the student can take them and turn over two more cards. If they don't match, the student turns them face down again and the next student has a go. The student with the most pairs at the end wins.

6 Question and Answer Aerobics

Divide the class into teams gathered in a gym or outside area where they can move about easily. Read out a question and students race to one side of the designated area to answer. If space or weather does not permit this, choose the first to raise their hand to answer.

At this time teacher can check the answering student's listening comprehension and can change the questions slightly, depending on the level of the students. The teacher can make the questions harder if all the students can answer simpler, shorter questions. A simple question might be '*Where is Tokyo?*' and a more complex one '*How do monsoons and typhoons differ?*'

Quirk and Greenbaum have shown how auxiliary verbs form the essential core of English grammar. In my experience, teaching auxiliary verbs in a clear and systematic way has repeatedly helped Japanese students at various levels of proficiency to achieve more rapid acquisition of basic question and answer conversational techniques.

Allen, V F *Inside English: How you can use insights from linguistics and the new grammars in the language classroom* Regents 1983

Quirk, R and Greenbaum, S A *University Grammar of English* Longman 1993.

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