

Negative questions

Contracted and uncontracted negative questions have different word order. Uncontracted negative questions are usually used in a formal style.

Aren't you coming? (Contracted - auxiliary verb + n't + subject)

Doesn't he understand? (Auxiliary verb + n't + subject)

Are you not coming? (Uncontracted - auxiliary verb + subject + not)

Does he not understand? (Auxiliary verb + subject + not)

Two meanings

A negative question can have two different kinds of meanings. It can, for example, be used to ask for confirmation of something you believe to be true.

Didn't you see Ann yesterday? How is she doing? (= I believe that you saw Ann yesterday.)

You may also express your opinions in a more polite way by changing them into negative questions.

Wouldn't it be nice to paint that wall green? (More polite than 'It would be nice to paint that wall green.')

A negative question can also be used to ask for confirmation of a negative belief. In this case the speaker is surprised that something has not happened or is not happening.

Hasn't the postman come yet?

Polite requests, offers, complaints etc

Pressing offers and invitations often assume the form of negative questions. They usually begin Won't you...? Wouldn't you...? or Why don't you...?

Wouldn't you like something to drink?

Why don't you come and spend the evening with us?

In other cases we do not normally use a negative question to ask people to do things.

Can you help me with my homework? (Ordinary question used as a request.)