

Tags

from [English Grammar Today](#)

Tags: uses

Tags are either questions, statements or imperatives added to a clause to invite a response from the listener:

A:

*You're a musician, **aren't you?***

B:

Well, yes, but I'm just an amateur.

A:

*She can't swim, **can she?***

B:

No. Apparently she never learnt as a child.

*Donna plays football, **doesn't she?***

*He was your teacher, **was he?***

A:

*Pass me that CD, **will you?***

B:

[passes the CD]

A:

Thanks.

Tags: form

Tags consist of one of the auxiliary verbs *be*, *do* or *have*, or the main verb *be*, or a modal verb, plus a subject, which is most commonly a pronoun:

main clause	<i>be, do, have</i> , modal	subject pronoun
<i>He's working as a tour guide,</i>	isn't	<i>he?</i>
<i>Your mother was Scottish,</i>	wasn't	<i>she?</i>
<i>She plays the piano,</i>	does	<i>she?</i>
<i>The shops don't open till 9.30,</i>	do	<i>they?</i>
<i>They've moved,</i>	have	<i>they?</i>
<i>You could sell it on the Internet,</i>	couldn't	<i>you?</i>
<i>Don't be late tonight,</i>	will	<i>you?</i>

When we use auxiliary *be*, *do* or *have*, a modal verb or main verb *be* in the main clause, this verb is used in the tag:

*She **was** crying, **wasn't** she?*

*He **does** look like his father, **doesn't** he?*

*They've waited a long time, **haven't** they?*

*You're Danish, **aren't** you?*

If there is no auxiliary or modal verb in the main clause, we use auxiliary *do, does, did* in the tag:

*He **plays** hockey, **does** he?*

*She **dances** beautifully, **doesn't** she?*

*The girls **wanted** to go home, **didn't** they?*

If the main clause verb is *I am*, then the negative tag form is *aren't I*:

*Sorry, **I'm** late again, **aren't** I?*

If the main clause verb is *used to*, the tag verb is *did*:

A:

*Martin **used to** live in Oxford, **didn't** he?*

B:

*Yes, **that's** right.*

If the main clause verb is *ought to*, the tag verb is most commonly *should* or, far less commonly, *ought*:

*We **ought to** leave now, really, **shouldn't** we? Or (far less commonly) We **ought to** leave now, really, **oughtn't** we?*

When tags follow imperatives, the tag verb is usually *will*:

A:

***Phone** me this evening, **will** you?*

B:

*Yeah, OK. **I'll** give you a call about 6.30.*

Question tags

Question tags turn statements into *yes-no* questions. There are two types.

Type 1

The first type of question tag consists of an affirmative main clause and a negative tag, or a negative main clause and an affirmative tag. Negative tags are most commonly used in the contracted form:

[main clause] *She's a translator*, [tag] **isn't she?** (affirmative main clause + negative tag)

He hasn't arrived yet, **has he?** (negative main clause + affirmative tag)

We can use type 1 question tags when we expect the answer to the question to confirm that what we say in the main clause is true:

A:

You work with Barbara, **don't you?** (A thinks it is true that B works with Barbara.)

B:

Yes, that's right.

A:

Sam's not very old, **is he?** (A thinks it is true that Sam is not very old.)

B:

No, he's only 24.

With type 1 tags, we can use falling intonation (↘) if we are fairly sure of the answer, and rising intonation (↗) if we are not so sure.

Compare

fairly sure		not so sure	
<i>We've met before,</i>	haven't we?	<i>You were at Kim's party,</i>	weren't you?

fairly sure	not so sure		
<i>He's not very happy,</i>	<i>is ↘he?</i>	<i>They're not open today,</i>	<i>a↗re they?</i>

Type 2

The second type of question tag consists of an affirmative main clause and an affirmative tag:

[main clause] *You're Joe's cousin,* [tag] **are you?**

*She got the email, **did she?***

We can use type 2 tags when we do not know if the answer is *yes* or *no*. The intonation is usually a rising tone:

A:

*Maureen **lives** in Hamden, **does s↗he?** (The speaker wants to know if Maureen lives in Hamden or not.)*

B:

Yes, She does. She was born there in fact.

A:

*You're a graphic designer, **are y↗ou?***

B:

No, not actually a designer, but I work with graphics.

A:

Oh, right.

Imperative tags

A tag after an imperative clause softens the imperative a little. The tag verb is most commonly *will* but we can also use *would*, *could*, *can* and *won't*:

*Turn the TV down, **will you?***

Don't shout, **will you?** I can hear you perfectly well.

Come here a minute, **can you?**

After the imperative with *let's*, we can use *shall* in the tag:

Let's have some lunch now, shall we?

Statement tags

We can use a statement tag to emphasise or reinforce an affirmative statement. The tag is also affirmative. They typically invite the listener to agree or sympathise in some way, or to offer a parallel comment. Statement tags are very informal:

A:

*I'm bored with this, I **am**.* (stronger than *I'm bored with this*)

B:

Me too.

A:

*My Maths teacher was lovely. He **was** a great teacher, he **was**.*

B:

Hm, you were lucky. Mine wasn't so good.

When the main clause has a pronoun subject, a statement tag can have a noun as the subject instead of a pronoun:

A:

*She won some money last week, **Catherine did**.*

B:

Really?

A:

Yeah.

*He was a great teacher, **Mr Mark was**.*

This construction is similar to a tail construction.

See also:

- [Headers and tails](#)

Universal tags: *right, yeah*

We can use *right* and *yeah* in very informal situations instead of question tags:

A:

*So, you're not coming with us tonight, **right**?*

B:

*No, I'm too busy. Sorry. or (less informally) You're not coming with us tonight, **are you**?*

A:

*They'll be here about 4.30, **yeah**?*

B:

*Yeah. That's what they said. or (less informally) They'll be here about 4.30, **won't they/will they**?*