

How to respond to "How are you?", "What's up?", and other conversation starters

There are a few questions that English speakers ask at the beginning of a conversation. These questions are simple tools to find out if there are any interesting topics to discuss:

How are you?

How's it going?

What's up?

What's happening?

You've certainly heard these questions, but you might be confused about how to answer. Here's a list of common answers to them:

How are you?

Fine.

This is a simple, straight answer. If you don't say anything else, though, it might be a signal that you don't want to continue the conversation.

Not bad.

This is a more friendly-sounding answer than "fine".

Fine, thanks.

This answer is formal. You might answer this way if someone you don't know, like a waiter at a restaurant, asks how you are.

Very well, thanks.

A person who likes to be grammatically proper might answer this way. Technically, the question "How...?" should be answered with an adverb. However, a lot of English speakers don't know or care about this. The people who do are "by the books" types who insist on using grammatically correct language.

Pretty good.

If you don't care as much about grammar, you can answer "Good" or "Pretty good". It's more common and much, much more casual.

Great! How are you doing?

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This is an enthusiastic, excited response. It's always good to ask a question back to the other person if you want to continue the conversation.

I'm hanging in there.

This answer makes it sound like you're having a tough day.

I've been better.

People usually give positive answers to the question "How are you?" If you give a negative answer like this one, it usually means that you want to tell the listener your sad story. So they'll usually ask what's wrong:

A: *How are you?*

B: *I've been better.*

A: *What's wrong?*

B: *I just found out that I'm being laid off.*

How's it going?

This question is similar to "How are you". The answers discussed above all work for "How's it going?" as well.

Here's another answer that will also work for "How's it going", but not for "How are you?"

It's going well.

This is a friendly, polite answer that's suitable for coworkers, clients, and acquaintances that you haven't seen in a while.

What's up?

This question means "What's happening in your life?" But you don't have to answer honestly. If you don't want to start a long conversation, you can use one of these standard replies:

Nothing much.

This is the most common answer. You can follow it by sharing something interesting that's happening: "Nothing much. Just getting ready for Vanessa's graduation."

Not a lot.

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This is another really common answer. It's just a bit fresher than "Nothing much" because it's a little less common.

Nothing.

This is more to-the-point. It might make you seem a little angry or rude.

Oh, just the usual.

Answer this way if you do mostly the same things each day.

Just the same old same old.

This phrase means that you're doing the same things every day, and you're a little bored of it.

Oh gosh, all kinds of stuff!

You can answer this way if your life has been really busy and exciting lately.

What's happening?

This question means the same thing as "What's up" and can be answered in the same way.

When not to answer

One other thing that you should know: all of these questions can also be used to mean "Hello". In that case, you don't have to answer. It would be more natural to respond with another greeting:

A: How are you?

B: Hey, how's it going?

So how do you know whether someone *really* wants to know how you are, or they're just saying "Hi"? You can tell that it's just a greeting if:

- **they're walking by you and don't stop to hear your answer**
- **they wave to you while asking**
- **the tone of their voice doesn't go up at the end**

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Polite, Professional Questions for Clarification in English

When You Don't Understand Someone

The questions below are always polite and professional to use in a conversation when you don't understand someone or didn't hear them clearly.

- I'm sorry, I didn't catch what you said. Could you repeat it (more slowly)?
- I'm sorry, I didn't understand that? Would you mind repeating it?
- I'm sorry, I didn't hear you clearly. Could you say that again?
- I'm sorry, what was that?
- Could you say that again, please?
- Could you repeat that, please?
- I'm sorry?

When a Word or Expression is New

- I'm sorry, I'm not sure I understand what you meant by [insert word or expression]?
- That's a new word/expression for me. Could you explain it?
- What does [insert word or expression] mean?*

Informal Questions for Clarification in English

Of course, with friends, family members, and close colleagues, it's 100% okay to be more informal. So let's look at a few examples of what you can say when you don't understand another person.

- What did you say?
- What was that?
- Excuse me?
- What?
- Huh?
- Hmm?

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Useful phrases for Group discussions:

1. Asking about or for an opinion

- Could you tell me....?
- What do you think about/of....?
- What's your opinion about....?
- Do you think/feel....?
- How do you feel about....?
- May I ask you....?

2. Asking for an explanation

- Could you explain to me....?
- Could someone please tell me....?
- Just tell me the reason why....?
- I don't really understand....?
- I just don't see why/what/how....
- Are you saying that....?
- What do you mean by that?
- I beg your pardon?
- I didn't quite get that. Excuse me, did you say that...?

3. Giving your opinion

- In my opinion/view....
- If you ask me....
- As far as I can see/*I'm concerned*....
- It seems to me that....
- I have the/a feeling that
- I think/feel/reckon/believe....
- Well, I'd say....
- If you want my opinion....
- You can take it from me that....
- First of all/*To start with* I'd like to point out ...
- What we have to decide is....
- There can be no doubt that....
- It's a fact that....
- Nobody will deny that....
- The way/*As I see it* Everyone knows....
- Let me put it this/another way....
- Let's get this clear (first)....
- Sorry to interrupt you, but....
- The point I'm trying to make is....
- Personally (speaking) I think....
- I'm absolutely convinced that....
- My view/*point of view* is that....
- The way I look at/see it is this
- What I actually meant was....

4. Giving an explanation

- Look, it's like this:
- What I mean is....
- The reason for this is....
- The main problem is....
- Just let me explain....
- Well, the reason is....
- Well, the thing is
- Above all we must keep in mind that....

5. Agreeing with an opinion

- I (quite) agree.
- I agree completely/entirely.
- I couldn't agree (with you) more.
- I entirely/completely agree with you on that.
- That's true/right.
- That's just it.
- Quite/Exactly/Precisely/Right/Certainly/Definitely.
- You're quite/so right.
- I think so, too.
- I don't think so either.
- That's just my feeling/opinion.
- That's just how I see it/*feel about it, too*.
- That's a very good/important point.
- You've got a good point there.
- Yes, of course/*definitely/absolutely* Marvelous.
- That's exactly what I mean/say.
- Yes, that's obvious.
- That's exactly how I see it.
- That's what I think
- How very true.
- So do I/So am I
- Yes, indeed.
- I'm all in favor of what you've been saying.

6. Qualified agreement

- Yes, perhaps, but....
- Yes, possibly, although....
- Yes, but on the other hand....
- Yes, up to a point.
- I agree up to a certain point, but....
- Yes, in a way.
- Maybe, I suppose so.
- Well, it depends.
- I don't think it's as simple as that....
- I see what you mean, but I think that's not the whole story
- You may be right there.
- Yes, but there's also another aspect to consider.