

THE INTERROGATIVE FORM WITH QUOI / QUE /QU'EST-CE QUE/QUEL (LE)

Goal: In this lesson, we learn the different translations of the interrogative word “what” into French.

1 – What → Quoi.

The most direct translation for “what” in French is “quoi”.

When someone says something inaudible to me, my automatic response is “What?” / “Quoi?” (Please, don't be as rude as I am. Use “Pardon” or “Excuse-me” instead. But you get the idea☺) In the interrogative form, Quoi is used in 2 conditions.

a) After a preposition.

What are you talking about? → *De quoi parles-tu?* (where De is a preposition)

What are they (ladies) thinking about? → *À quoi pensent-elles?* (where À is a preposition)

What does she believe in? → *En quoi croit-elle?* (where En is a preposition)

Formula = Preposition + Quoi + Inverted Verb + ?

Important: It is not unusual to start a question with a preposition in French. As a tip, in order to obtain a perfect translation from English to French, you may have to modify a little the original question in English by placing the preposition at the beginning of your sentence. For example, just for the sake of translating, “What does she believe in?” could also be “*In what does she believe?*” which gives us a perfect match in French literally: *En quoi croit-elle?*”

Also, based on what we have already learned in Week 6 – Leçon 1, I'm sure you also remember that the *magic* expression “est-ce que” can also be used to ask any question in French, but this time, no inversion of the verb occurs. So let's go back to our 2 examples given above and let's use est-ce que.

What are you talking about? → *De quoi est-ce que tu parles?*

What are they (ladies) thinking about? → *À quoi est-ce qu'elles pensent?*

What does she believe in? → *En quoi est-ce qu'elle croit?*

Formula = Preposition + Quoi + Est-ce que + Subject + Verb + ?

b) At the end of regular a sentence (to turn affirmative/negative sentence into a question)

If you want to ask a question with *Quoi* in a very “casual” and “relaxed” manner, simply add it at the end of your sentence (affirmative or negative). I will not recommend this manner when writing essays, or when talking in a professional environment. This is often used between friends and family. It's like asking someone in English: “*You say what?*” “*You drink what?*” “*You think about what?*” Now, let's see how we can turn in interrogations the same examples provided earlier.

What are you talking about? → You are talking about what? → **Tu parles de quoi?**

What are they (ladies) thinking about? → They are thinking about what? **Elles pensent à quoi?**

What does she believe in? → She believes in what? **Elle croit en quoi?**

Formula = Affirmative/Negative sentence + Quoi + ?

2 – What → Que.

Asking questions with Que are very easy to do. Simply place Que at the very beginning of a question and don't forget the inversion. [No prepositions involved this time].

For example: according to lesson 1 on Week 6, “Do you eat?” = “*manges-tu?*” Therefore, **What** do you eat? = “Que *manges-tu?*”

What do we like? = “Qu'*aimons-nous?*” [*aimons* begins with a **vowel**, so que becomes **qu'**]

What do Ellen and Roger say? “Que *disent Ellen et Roger?*” [Ellen and Roger are the subjects. Based on our formula below, we place them after the verb *disent* (say). Note that we could have also said: “Que *disent-ils?*” “What do THEY say? where ILS/THEY represent both Ellen and Roger.]

Formula = Que + Verb + Subject + ?

3 – What → Qu'est-ce que...

Don't be intimidated by Qu'est-ce que because you actually already know what it is made of. Take a close look at it and you'll notice that 2 different components form Qu'est-ce que: **Que** + **Est-ce que...** The E in Que has been removed and replaced with an apostrophe because it is followed by another vowel (as in qu'*aimons-nous* above). And by now, you may have probably noticed that each time est-ce que is used to ask a question, there is no inversion of the verb. Now, let's see how use Qu'est-ce que in sentences previously given.

What do you eat → Que *manges-tu?* (inversion) → Qu'est-ce que tu *manges?* (No inversion)

What do we like → Qu'*aimons-nous?* (inversion) → Qu'est-ce que nous *aimons?* (No inversion)

What do Ellen and Roger say? → Que *disent Ellen et Roger?* (inversion) → Qu'est-ce que Ellen et Roger *disent?* (No inversion)

Formula = Qu'est-ce que + Subject + Verb + ?

Tip: It may help to know what qu'est-ce que means literally in English. So let's break it down: Qu'est-ce que...? = What is that that...? Therefore, “**Qu'est-ce que tu manges?**” simply means “**What is that that you eat?**”

4 – What/Which → Quel(s)/Quelle(s)

What is translated by...

Quel in French whenever it is followed by a masculine-singular noun

Quels in French whenever it is followed by a masculine-plural noun

Quelle in French whenever it is followed by a feminine-singular noun

Quelles in French whenever it is followed by a feminine-plural noun

Let's study some examples:

What pencil does she have? → **Quel crayon** a-t-elle? / Quel crayon est-ce qu'elle a?

What car are we thinking about? → À **quelle voiture** pensons-nous ? / À quelle voiture est-ce que nous pensons ? [As you can see here, the sentence begins with a preposition, “à”. But we used quelle instead of quoi (page 1) because what is immediately followed by the noun “voiture”(car), not a verb.]

What pencils does she have? **Quels crayons** a-t-elle? / Quels crayons est-ce qu'elle a?

What cars are we thinking about? À **quelles voitures** pensons-nous ? / À quelles voitures est-ce que nous pensons ?

As shown above, when using quel(s)/quelle(s) to ask a question, you can either invert the verb, or use est-ce que (no inversion). In formula below, preposition into parentheses simply means that it is optional.

Formula = (preposition) + Quel(s)/Quelle(s) +Noun or Adjectives+ Inversion or Est-ce que (no inversion)

Very important:

- As a general rule, when you ask a question in French, Que is used before a verb (Que manges-tu? / What do you eat?) and Quel before a noun or an adjective (Quel vélo as-tu? / What bike do you have?).

However, you will quite sometimes encounter quel before the verb est (is) from être in expression like what is your name? (Quel est ton nom?) instead of Qu'est ton nom? (This isn't necessarily wrong grammatically, by the way). To my knowledge, it seems that ONLY the verb être accepts such modification of que into quel when placed before a verb. (Perhaps Quel here is an abbreviated form of lequel/laquelle (that we will study much later on), or is it simply used for phonological reason???)

Thus, so far, I regret to tell you that I have no idea why this is so. I grew up learning it this way and nobody ever told me why it we had to use Quel in this case and not Que. I guess the disadvantage with having any language as a first language is that one barely questions what he or she is taught until they start teaching it to others. Feel free to ask other French-speaking people about it and email me if you have any convincing argument on the subject. I would love to learn more of this subject 😊.

- What have different other meanings in French in addition to the one covered in this lesson. For example: *Tell me what you think = Dis-moi ce que tu penses.* But since the main goal of this chapter was to focus on the interrogative form, I chose not to talk about them here. *La patience est un chemin d'or* 😊