

What? = *que, qu'est-ce que* or *quoi*?

Mais, que fait le gouvernement ? De quoi parlez-vous ?
But what is the government doing? What are you talking about?

LESSON

What is it?

Que, qu'est-ce que and *quoi* are interrogative structures used for asking questions. The three of them mean "what?" but they are used differently.

What is it like in English?

There is only one way of saying "what?" in English, while there are several ways of doing so in French.

What are you doing? → *Que faites-vous ? = Qu'est-ce que vous faites ? = Vous faites quoi ?*

Note that in English, the order of words in a question is less flexible than in French. It is therefore rare to hear "You are doing what?" whereas it is very common in French.

What is it like in French?

In French, "what" takes different forms according to its function and position in the question.

1. When the interrogative "what" is the subject of the question, you will use: *qu'est-ce qui*.

Qu'est-ce qui a déclenché cet événement ? → What has triggered this event?

2. When the interrogative "what" is the object of the question, you can use *qu'est-ce que, que* or *quoi*, depending on the formality of the situation:

Que faites-vous ? (formal) = *Qu'est-ce que vous faites ?* (standard) = *Vous faites quoi ?* (informal)

→ What are you doing?

a. *qu'est-ce que* + subject + verb

Qu'est-ce que le docteur recommande ? → What does the doctor order?

b. *que* + verb + subject

Que fait Julien ? Que dit-il ? → What is Julien doing? What is he saying?

Note the subject-verb inversion (when it's a pronoun there is a hyphen in between).

Qu'a dit le président ? → What did the president say?

Whatch out! When the verb starts with a vowel, *que* becomes *qu'*.

c. *quoi*

- At the end of a sentence, *que* becomes *quoi*:

Le président a dit quoi ? → What did the president say?

In this sentence, this is the same word order as a statement. The intonation is flat up to *quoi* where it rises.

- Que* + verb with a preposition becomes preposition + *quoi*: *à quoi, de quoi, avec quoi, sur quoi* etc.

À quoi fait-elle référence ? = Elle fait référence à quoi ? → What is she referring to?

De quoi les enfants ont-ils besoin ? = Les enfants ont besoin de quoi ? → What do the children need?

Preposition + *quoi* can be at the start or end of a question whereas *qu'est-ce que* or *que* need to be at the start of the sentence. *Quoi* on its own cannot be at the start of a question except with the idiomatic expression: *Quoi de neuf ?* → What's up?

EXERCISES

1 Fill in the gaps with *que, qu'est-ce que* or *quoi*.

- a. ferez-vous après vos études ?
- b. elle dira ?
- c. de neuf ?
- d. On a retrouvé ?
- e. Avec allez-vous faire la cuisine ?
- f. il y aura à la télé ce soir ?
- g. dit-elle ?

2 Fill in the following table.

Que prends-tu ?	.....	Tu prends quoi ?
.....	Qu'est-ce qu'elle a dit ?	.....
.....	.....	Les parents ont décidé quoi ?
Qu'est-ce ?	.....	.....
.....	Qu'est-ce que cela signifie ?	.....
.....	.....	La loi interdira quoi ?

3 Translate the following questions into French, giving all possibilities.

- a. What is making that noise?
→
- b. What are you fighting for?
→
- c. What do you like?
→
- d. What has been done?
→
- e. What did they talk about?
→
- f. What will happen?
→
- g. What is she writing about?
→