

**If**  
**and**  
**Whether**



## If and Whether

**If** and **whether** are sometimes interchangeable, but not always. The easiest way to avoid errors is to follow this rule:

- Use **if** to introduce a condition.
- In all other cases, use **whether**.

Using the wrong word could change the meaning of the sentence completely.

Generally, we use **if** to introduce a condition (see conditional):

- **If** you see them, let me know.

And we use **whether** to talk about alternatives:

- Do you know **whether** they are coming (or not)?

This is general; however, we can also use **if** to introduce alternatives:

- Do you know **if** they're coming?

So how do we know which one to choose?

1. To sound more formal, use **whether** to introduce an alternative. **Whether** is generally preferred in a formal style:

- We discussed **whether** we should cancel the meeting.

When introducing alternatives, your choice between **if** and **whether** will depend on two things:

2. When introducing two options, use **whether**.

- I don't know **whether** the meeting is in the morning or the afternoon. (*sounds formal*)

There are two options. Morning is one option, and afternoon is another option, so we use **whether**.

When using **if**, we are not limited to two options. So, we can say:

- I don't know **if** the meeting is in the morning or the afternoon.

But we can also say:

- I don't know **if** the meeting is in the morning or the afternoon, or if it's the next day.

Using **if**, we allow for other options. But with **whether**, we're limited to two choices.

When you can only use **whether**

In certain structures, only **whether** is possible. We use **whether**, and not **if**, after prepositions and infinitives, and as subjects and complements of a sentence

1. Use **whether** after a preposition

We don't use **if** after prepositions. We use **whether** instead:

- We're talking about **whether** this would be best.
- It's not a question of **whether** it's possible.

2. Use **whether** before infinitives

Before infinitives (to + verb), only **whether** is possible:

- I don't know **whether** to help them?
- We had a discussion about **whether** to leave or not.

3. Use **whether** as a subject and complement

**Whether** is preferred when introducing a subject or a complement in a sentence:

- The question is **whether** it will last.
- **Whether** she was joking was lost in translation.

Subject	Verb	Complement
The question	Is	<b>whether</b> it will last.
<b>Whether</b> she was joking	was	lost in translation.

## NOTE

Using **if** as a complement is also possible, but less common:

- The question is **if** it will last.

## **Whether** in formal writing

When both **if** and **whether** are possible, choose **whether** in formal writing:

- Additional studies are required to determine **whether** a correlation exists.

## **Whether** and **if** in indirect questions

**Whether** and **if** can both introduce indirect questions.

Direct question	Indirect question
Do you like wine?	She asked <b>if</b> I liked wine. She asked <b>whether</b> I liked wine.
Do you want a drink?	He asked <b>if</b> I wanted a drink. He asked <b>whether</b> I wanted a drink.
Did you lock the door?	They wanted to know <b>if</b> I locked the door. They wanted to know <b>whether</b> I locked the door.

Remember that **whether** is preferred before **or**, especially in formal writing:

- The officials have not decided **whether** the meeting will be held on Thursday **or** Friday.

Avoid these common mistakes

**We can't omit **whether** or **if**:**

- I want to find out **if** the room has an extra bed.
- I want to find out the room has an extra bed or not.

**We don't use **either** in indirect questions:**

- We can't say **whether** it's possible or not.
- We can't say **either** it's possible or not.

**Whether** and **if** after verbs of doubt

We use **if** or **whether** in sentences after verbs of doubt:

- I don't know **if/whether** I should tell you this.
- I doubt **if/whether** they will share the results of the test.
- I'm not sure **if/whether** they'll admit it.

**If** or **whether** can change the meaning of a sentence.

*(**whether** when used with only one option indicates **whether...** or not.)*

Remember that **whether** is preferred before **or**, especially in formal writing:

- The officials have not decided **whether** the meeting will be held on Thursday **or** Friday.

**Compare:** Let me know **if** you need more time.

*(Only let me know **if** you need more time, **if** not, say nothing)*

Let me know **whether** you need more time.

*(You have to tell me **whether** you need more time or not; you must say something)*

After checking some current scientific journals (***The Lancet, Nature, Plos One***) I found that the older, more established journals such as ***The Lancet*** used **whether** much more than the more recent ones such as ***Plos One*** that preferred **if**.