Asking or Telling? Spotting Question Marks in Year 1 Writing

In Year 1, children learn to spot the difference between a sentence that tells you something (a statement) and one that asks something (a question) - and to show that difference with the right punctuation mark at the end. This guide explains what that looks like in class and some gentle, playful ways you can notice it together at home.

What it is

A sentence is a group of words that makes complete sense on its own. Some sentences tell you something - these are called statements, like 'The cat is asleep.' Others ask something - these are questions, like 'Is the cat asleep?' The only difference on the page is often the punctuation mark (a written symbol that shows how a sentence works) at the end: a full stop (.) for a statement, or a question mark (?) for a question. The question mark has a curly shape that pupils are taught to recognise and form correctly. Spotting which type of sentence they're reading or writing helps children understand meaning, not just punctuation - a question usually needs an answer, while a statement is simply information. This is an early but important building block in learning how punctuation changes the way a sentence sounds and what job it is doing.

What happens

According to the Department for Education's National Curriculum for English, Year 1 pupils are taught to demarcate (mark the start and end of) sentences using a capital letter and an appropriate end punctuation mark - a full stop, question mark or exclamation mark. Teachers build on the full stops and capital letters children already know by introducing question marks as another way to end a sentence correctly. Exactly how this is taught - whether through sorting activities, reading aloud, or spotting examples in storybooks - varies from school to school and even class to class, so it's worth asking your child's teacher what approach they're using if you'd like to match it at home. The overall aim set out in the curriculum is for children to notice that punctuation is not decoration - it changes how a sentence should be read and understood.

What it means for your child

Once your child is confident with capital letters and full stops, learning to spot and use question marks is a natural next step. It helps them understand that writing carries tone and purpose, not just words - a question invites a reply, while a statement simply tells. Many children find it helpful to listen for the rise in voice at the end of a spoken question ('Are you coming?') compared with the flatter tone of a statement ('You are coming.'). Recognising question starter words such as 'What', 'Why', 'Who', 'Where', 'When' and 'How' can also give children an extra clue when sorting or checking their own writing. There's no need to worry if this takes time to click - like all new punctuation, it usually becomes secure with gentle, repeated exposure rather than drilling, and children move at their own pace.

How you can help at home

You don't need any special resources - just everyday chatting. Try saying a few short sentences aloud and asking your child whether each one is 'asking' or 'telling', exaggerating the rise in your voice for questions. You could turn it into a playful sorting game with simple sentences written on paper or drawn with chalk,

popping them into an 'asking' pile or a 'telling' pile before adding the missing full stop or question mark together. When reading bedtime stories, pause now and then to point out a question mark and ask what question is being asked. Encourage your child to notice question words like 'What' or 'Why' at the start of a sentence. Keep it light and short - a couple of minutes is plenty, and praise for having a go matters more than getting every one right.

Questions parents often ask

Should my child already know this by now? Children progress at different rates, and this skill builds gradually through Year 1 - if you're concerned, it's best to ask your child's teacher, who knows where your child is in their learning. My child mixes up full stops and question marks when writing - is that normal? Yes, this is a common part of learning, and practice over time usually helps it become more secure. Is there a 'right' way schools teach this? Methods vary between schools and classes, so if you'd like to support what's happening in the classroom specifically, ask your child's teacher what approach they use. What if English isn't spoken at home? That's absolutely fine - spotting question words and the question mark shape works well alongside learning in any home language too.

Sources

- Department for Education (GOV.UK) - National curriculum in England: English programmes of study (key stages 1 and 2)
- Department for Education (GOV.UK) - English Appendix 2: Vocabulary, punctuation and grammar