Short questions often have a very simple structure. They may consist of just a question word or a short phrase beginning with a question word.

‘Susie is coming.’ ‘When?’
‘The manager wants to talk to you.’ ‘What for?’
‘Can you wash the clothes?’ ‘Why me?’
‘Dinner isn’t ready.’ ‘Why not?’

Echo questions

In echo questions, the speaker repeats a part of the sentence and puts a question word in place of the part he or she is asking about.

‘Just listen to this?’ ‘Just listen to what?’
‘We are going to Venice on holiday.’ ‘You are going where?’
‘She has broken the land mower.’ ‘She has broken what?’

Attention signals

Short questions are often used in conversations to show that the listener is paying attention. Common attention signals are Really? and Oh, yes?. A question tag structure consisting of an auxiliary verb and pronoun can also be used.

‘Annie is leaving her job.’ ‘Really?’
‘John is going out with that girl next door.’ ‘Oh, is he?’
‘It was a horrible experience.’ ‘Was it?’

Note that these questions do not ask for information – they simply show that the listener is ‘listening’.

Affirmative statements can be followed by negative questions to express emphatic agreement.

‘She has lost a lot of weight.’ ‘Yes, hasn’t she?’