

BBC Learning English

How to ...

Discussions

Making suggestions



Jackie: Hello, I'm Jackie Dalton. In this programme, we're going to look at the language we use when we make suggestions. We'll do this by listening to clips from a discussion in the BBC Learning English offices. A member of BBC Learning English is leaving the team to go and work somewhere else and her colleagues are planning a party for her. We'll hear people making suggestions about what the party could involve.

In English, suggestions are very often expressed in the form of questions. Listen to this discussion. What language structure is used to make suggestions here?

Discussion

- Well it's for Jackie's leaving party because she's going to work in another department, so we need to have a really good party so we can send her off really well. So what shall we do?
- Well, why don't we have a surprise party?
- That's a good idea...
- Why don't we hire the ground floor of a bar, get some food in and we could get a band in?

Jackie: Those suggestions were structured as questions. 'Why don't...' followed by the subject – in this case, 'we' and then the infinitive verb form without 'to'. Listen to some more examples of this structure.

Examples

- I'm worried that they won't have anything to do on Sunday.
- Well, why don't they come with us?

- I don't think he'll have time to see them.

-Why doesn't he get the later train, then he'll have more time?

Jackie: So 'why don't' or 'why doesn't' is followed by the subject and then the base infinitive form of the verb. Another useful expression that also follows this structure is 'shall we...'

Discussion

Shall we have some music?

Jackie: So 'shall' plus the subject, plus the base infinitive of the verb.

Discussion

Shall we have some music?

Jackie: Now we're going to hear a slightly different kind of structure, this time with the expression 'why not...'

Discussion

- But why do we have to have catering? That's expensive!

- Yeah, why not buy our own food?

Jackie: 'Why not buy our own food?' The key difference with 'why not' is that the subject isn't included, just the infinitive form of the verb without 'to'.

Examples

Why not do that tomorrow?

Jackie: So, so far, we've looked at the structures with 'shall we...' and 'why don't...' which are followed by the subject and the base infinitive form of the verb and we've looked at 'why not....', which is followed by just the base infinitive verb form. Listen again to these examples.

Discussion

- Shall we have some music?
- Yeah, why not buy our own food?
- Why don't we make our own food?
- I was thinking exactly that myself.
- That's a nice idea.

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Jackie: A word that's often useful when making suggestions about something you and someone else could do together is 'let's' – an abbreviation of 'let us'.

Discussion

Let's ask Carrie to make a cake.

Jackie: You usually use 'let's' when you want to sort of say 'Come on everybody!' and motivate people. And in this case, it's met with an agreement: 'Let's do that'.

Discussion

Let's ask Carrie to make a cake.

Yeah, let's do that

Jackie: The last bits of the language of suggestions we're going to look at are the words 'could' and 'should'. 'Should' sounds a bit more like you're giving advice than 'could'. 'Could' expresses possibility. But they can both be used for making suggestions. Let's start with 'could'.

Discussion

- Perhaps we could put up some decorations in the office, some balloons and...
- Yeah

- ...A 'Goodbye Jackie' banner...

Jackie: So the structure here is the subject –'we', followed by 'could', followed by the infinitive base form of the verb. Listen to some other examples.

Examples

I could go tomorrow

He could tell them tonight

Jackie: The example we heard earlier included the word 'perhaps'.

Discussion

Perhaps we could put up some decorations in the office.

Jackie: 'Perhaps' has the effect of making the suggestion sound a bit more polite. Another word with a similar effect is 'maybe': 'Maybe we could put up some decorations.'

So what about the word 'should'? As I mentioned, 'should' sounds a bit more like you're giving advice than 'could' - as if it's something you're sure is a good idea.

Discussion

I think we should buy a really, really big card - a huge card - and we should get everybody to sign it.

Jackie: Again, subject followed by 'should', followed by the infinitive verb. Adding 'I think', like 'perhaps' and 'maybe', softens the statement a bit.

Discussion

I think we should all buy a really, really big card.