

I was wondering

Indirect Language for American English

Someone once asked me why people say "I was wondering" instead of asking a question. And it really is a great question because we just finished talking about how Americans may seem to be more direct, or even blunt, when they speak. So there seems to be a contradiction here because people use the phrase "I was wondering" as an indirect way to make a request or to ask a yes-no question. Yes, that is a contradiction to the idea or the observation that the American English language is a more direct language. Using a statement that begins with I was wondering in place of a question is not exactly assertive either, is it? No, it's not. Suffice it to say that adjusting to American English language culture does have its challenges.

Why do people say I was wondering instead of asking a question? Yes, that **IS** a good question, and it just goes to show that there is far more to knowing and learning English than just learning grammar and vocabulary. Learning English, also, means learning the culture that goes with the English language. The two are inseparable. If you learn the American English language, you learn the American English culture.

American English speakers want to communicate exactly what they mean to say, but they sometimes use indirect language to accomplish this. The reason for this is that American English speakers want to be tactful in how they, in a way, directly communicate what they want to say. Using tact can, also, mean communicating effectively in the context of American English language culture. Not using tact can easily make communication ineffective.

Beginning a statement with "I was wondering" is a way to indirectly ask a question or make a request. And even though this is a statement, not a question, people understand that it really is a question and not merely a statement of what someone is wondering or thinking about. The message is direct enough, though the indirect language it's wrapped in serves to soften the directness. That's how communicating in English can be sometimes, and it's culturally significant.

Here are a few examples of how to use I was wondering.

- I was wondering if I could talk to you this afternoon. > The question is this: Could I talk to you this afternoon?
- I was wondering if you if the diagrams and charts are ready. > The question is this: Are the diagrams and charts ready?
- I was wondering when the report is going to be ready. > The question is this: When is the report going to be ready?
- I was wondering what the next step is. > The question is this: What's the next step?
- I was wondering how the orientation presentation for our new partners is coming along? > How is the orientation presentation coming along?
- I was wondering if you could give me a ride to the train station. > The question is this: Can you give me a ride to the train station?

Of course, anyone could ask a direct question instead of using statements that begin with "I was wondering". But the point is that people do not always do that. Why do people use "I was wondering" instead of just asking a question? Here are some reasons to use a statement that begins with I was wondering instead of asking a question.

- It lessens the possibility that they will sound overly assertive, which could mean, in some situations, aggressive, depending on who is listening. How well do you know your professional colleagues? Are you tuned in to what the "right communication" is for situations at work?
- It helps lessen the possibility that someone could feel pressure from the person making the request or asking the question.
- It could make it easier for someone to say "no" to your request or question by wrapping a yes-no question or a request in this sort of indirect language. It opens up the possibility of discussion, not just the expectation of "yes or no". Do you want a discussion if the answer is no? Saying I was wondering can serve to invite someone to say more than "no" if the answer is, in fact, no. If the answer is no, maybe, that's what you want.
- It could have something to do with hierarchy. Maybe, employees want to be sure that they don't come across, in a way, as forceful or too forceful when speaking to their manager or someone in a more senior position.
- It could have nothing to do with hierarchy. It could just be that using this sort of language for a request or a question helps ensure that professional colleagues do not come across as overbearing or, in a way "bossy", when they need the cooperation of colleagues that they are working with on a project.

When all is said and done, people use statements that begin with "I was wondering" as one way to establish and maintain good relations and good rapport with anyone that they work with. How well do you know your professional colleagues? Are you tuned in to what the "right communication" is for situations at work? When does more direct language work better, and when does more indirect language work better?

If you ask American English speakers why they say I was wondering instead of asking a question, many people might not know what to say. It's just part of the language they use, meaning it's part of their culture. Most people don't think about their language or communication culture or analyze their language or communication culture, so they might not know exactly what to say about "I was wondering" and why exactly they use it when they really mean to ask a question. In fact, it could be that everyone thinks the rest of the world communicates the way they do. But that's not true, of course. So while you're here working in the United States it could be a good idea to stop wondering why people say "I was wondering" and start thinking about when it's best to say "I was wondering". It's an indirect way of making a request or asking a yes-no question, and in case you were wondering, there are times when that just might be a better way to ask a question or make a request.