Situation

John and Susan work in the same office. Another colleague, Larry, had asked them to meet with him on Monday morning at 7:00 a.m. to discuss a pressing issue.

It is now 7:20 a.m. on Monday. John and Susan are in the office. Larry has not shown up or called. Read the conversation that John and Susan are having:

John: Where is Larry?
Susan: I don't know where he is.

John: When did he leave the house?
Susan: I can't tell you when he left. I called his place five minutes ago, but no one answered.

John: He must be on his way then. How does he get to the office? Does he drive?
Susan: I've never asked him how he gets here.

John: Why don't we ask his secretary what time she expects him?
Susan: None of the secretaries get in before 8:30. I'm sure we're the only ones here this early.

John: I hope Larry's okay. I'm getting kind of worried about what might have happened to him.

Susan: He's probably stuck in traffic. Why he wanted to meet so early is a mystery to me!
Function of a Noun Clause

The underlined statements in the preceding conversation are all examples of noun clauses.

Noun clauses are used in a sentence to describe actions which are subordinate to the main action of the sentence.

Let's look closely at some of John's and Susan's statements:

John: When did he leave the house?
Susan: I don't know when he left.

- The **action** expressed in John's **question** is **leave**.
- The **main action** expressed in Susan's **response** is **know**.

"When he left" describes an **action** which is **subordinate** to the **main action** (know) of the sentence.

A noun clause gets its name from the function it serves.

A noun is the name of a person, place, or thing. Examples of nouns are:
- my boss
- the affidavit
- a witness

A noun can function as:

1. **subject** of a verb
   - His reasons are a mystery to me.

2. **object** of a (transitive) verb
   - I don't know his location.

3. **object** of a preposition
   - I'm worried about my colleague.

A clause is composed of a **subject** and a **verb**. Examples of clauses are:
- She knows
- My boss went
- The client isn't coming

A noun clause has the **same functions** as a noun.
A **noun clause** can function as:

1. the **subject** of a verb
2. the **object** of a verb
3. the **object** of a preposition

*For example:*

1. **subject** of a verb
   - His reasons are a mystery to me.
   - *Why he wanted to meet* is a mystery to me.

2. **object** of a verb
   - I don't know his location.
   - I don't know *where he is*.

3. **object** of a preposition
   - I'm worried about my colleague.
   - I'm worried about *what might have happened to him*.

In each of the above examples, the **noun** has been **replaced** by a **description** of that noun.

The **description** is expressed by means of a **subject** and a **verb**, that is, by means of a **clause**.
Using Noun Clauses

**Form of a Noun Clause**

As explained earlier, noun clauses function in the sentence to describe actions which are *subordinate* to the main action.

Therefore, a noun clause must be introduced by a *subordinating conjunction*.

A *conjunction* is a word that *joins* two actions. *And* and *but* are typical *conjunctions*.

*For example:*

She leaves work *and* picks up her kids from school.
He understands almost everything, *but* he has a hard time expressing himself.

The *subordinating conjunction* joins a *subordinate action* to the *main action*.

*For example:*

I don't know *why* they refused to arbitrate.

The *first word* of the noun clause must be a *subordinating conjunction*.

Because most noun clauses describe *who, what, when, where, whose, which,* and *how,* the *subordinating conjunctions* used to introduce noun clauses are almost always *WH-words.*

*For example:*

They can't remember *where they put that file.*

1. The *wh-word* indicates the *kind of information* the noun clause contains:

   *location = where.*

2. The *subject* of the noun clause must follow the *subordinating conjunction:*

   *where they.*

3. The *verb* of the noun clause follows the *subject,* just as in any other clause:

   *where they put*
NOTE

Sometimes the *subordinator* is used as the *subject* of the *noun clause*. For example:

I can't remember **who** told me that.

I'm very interested in **what** happened.

In these instances, the verb **follows** the wh-word.

**REMEMBER**  
Use *sentential* -- *not* interrogative -- word order in noun clauses.

CORRECT: We objected to **what** she said.
INCORRECT: We objected to what **did** she say.

The *function* of the auxiliary (*do, did*) in the interrogative is to notify the listener (or the reader) that a question is being asked. Information is requested in a question, and the listener/reader must typically provide this information in his/her response.

**For example:**

**Why** did he leave the firm?

The listener/reader has to provide an answer:

**Because** he . . .

**However**, in the following statement:

I can't tell you **why** he left the firm.

there is no information requested.

**Instead**

I can't tell you **why** he left the firm.

is equivalent to:

I can't tell you **his reason**.
EXERCISES

Answer the following questions using a noun clause as indicated:

Example:

**What** did the client say?
I can't discuss **what the client said**.

1. Where are they holding next month's conference?
   I don't know _______________________.

2. When will they be ready for trial?
   They haven't told me ____________________.

3. How much are they claiming in damages?
   I still haven't heard ____________________.

4. Who are their key witnesses?
   We'll find out tomorrow ____________________.

5. Why didn’t they include an arbitration clause in that contract?
   I can't understand ____________________.

6. Whose office should we use?
   It doesn't matter ____________________.

7. What is the definition of *materiality* in that jurisdiction?
   My associate is checking ____________________.
YOUR TURN

ANSWER SHEET

1. Where are they holding next month's conference?
   I don't know where they're holding next month’s conference.

2. When will they be ready for trial?
   They haven't told me when they'll be ready for trial.

3. How much are they claiming in damages?
   I still haven't heard how much they're claiming in damages.

4. Who are their key witnesses?
   We'll find out tomorrow who their key witnesses are.

5. Why didn't they include an arbitration clause in that contract?
   I can't understand why they didn't include an arbitration clause in that contract.

6. Whose office should we use?
   It doesn't matter whose office we use.

7. What is the definition of materiality in that jurisdiction?
   My associate is checking what the definition of materiality is in that jurisdiction.