



American Expression E2369 How come

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"How come" is a colloquial expression commonly used in English to ask about the reason or cause for something. It functions similarly to "why," though it is often perceived as more informal and conversational. The phrase is widely used in everyday speech to inquire about explanations or justifications, offering a casual way to explore reasons behind events, actions, or situations.

The origins of "how come" can be traced back to older English usage, particularly in the 19th century. It evolved as a shortened form of "how does it come to be that," which asks how a particular circumstance or event has occurred. Over time, the phrase was simplified and became ingrained in modern conversational English. Its simplicity and ease of use make it a common choice, especially in informal dialogues.

While "how come" functions similarly to "why," the two expressions are not always interchangeable. "Why" tends to be more direct and formal, often used in written language or more structured situations. "How come," on the other hand, feels more relaxed and can soften the tone of a question. For example, asking "How come you didn't come to the party?" sounds less confrontational than "Why didn't you come to the party?" Both ask for the same information, but the former carries a gentler, more inquisitive tone, making it a preferred choice in casual conversation.

Another aspect of "how come" is its versatility in both positive and negative contexts. It can be used to express curiosity, confusion, or even mild surprise about a situation. Someone might say, "How come the store is closed today?" when they are puzzled by the unexpected closure. Alternatively, it can be used in a more positive context: "How come you look so happy today?" Here, the speaker is asking for the cause of the person's happiness, but the tone remains friendly and lighthearted.

In grammar, "how come" is typically followed by a subject and verb, rather than the inversion often seen with "why" questions. For instance, one would say, "How come you are late?" instead of "Why are you late?" This structure is one of the features that distinguishes it from "why" in terms of both form and function.

In summary, "how come" is an informal yet widely accepted way to ask for reasons or explanations. Its origins stem from older English expressions, and its casual tone makes it suitable for everyday conversation. While closely related to "why," it carries a slightly softer and more conversational feel, making it a popular choice when seeking clarification in a non-confrontational way.

Questions for Discussion

1. How does the phrase "how come" differ from "why" in tone and usage, and when might one be more appropriate than the other?
2. What are some situations where using "how come" can make a question feel less confrontational or more casual?
3. In what ways does the structure of "how come" differ grammatically from traditional question forms in English?
4. How do you think language evolves to include informal phrases like "how come," and why do such expressions become so widely used?
5. Can you think of examples in your own conversations where using "how come" has helped soften a question or express curiosity?