

Reported / Indirect Speech — quick guide

What it is

We use **reported (indirect) speech** to tell someone what another person said or thought. Pronouns, time words and—often—verb tenses change because the speaker and time are different.

- “*I don’t have time.*” → She said (that) **she didn’t** have time.
- “*I’m tired.*” → He said (that) **he was** tired.

We often omit **that** after reporting verbs: *She said she was late.*

Say vs. tell (and friends)

- **say** + clause: *She said (that) it was urgent.*
- **tell** + **object** + clause: *She told me (that) it was urgent.*
- Other useful verbs: *ask, advise, warn, promise, invite, remind, suggest.*

Tense changes (backshift)

Direct speech	→ Reported speech	Example
Present simple	Past simple	“ <i>I like it.</i> ” → He said he <i>liked</i> it.
Present continuous	Past continuous	“ <i>I’m studying.</i> ” → She said she <i>was studying</i> .
Past simple	Past perfect	“ <i>I lost it.</i> ” → He said he <i>had lost</i> it.
Present perfect / Past perfect	Past perfect (unchanged)	“ <i>I’ve seen it.</i> ” → She said she <i>had seen</i> it.
Will	would	“ <i>I’ll help.</i> ” → He said he <i>would</i> help.
Can	could	“ <i>I can come.</i> ” → She said she <i>could</i> come.
May	might	“ <i>I may be late.</i> ” → He said he <i>might</i> be late.
Must (obligation)	had to	“ <i>I must leave.</i> ” → She said she <i>had to</i> leave.
<i>could / should / would / might / ought to</i>	usually unchanged	“ <i>We should go.</i> ” → They said we <i>should</i> go.

No backshift is also possible when the reporting verb is in the present (*He says he is tired*) or when the statement is still true/general fact (*She said water boils at 100°C*).

Time & place words

Direct	→ Reported
now	then / at that moment
today / tonight	that day / that night
yesterday / last night	the day/night before
tomorrow / next week	the next/following day / week
last week	the previous week / the week before
this week	that week
here	there
... ago	... before

Reported questions

- **wh- questions** keep the wh-word and use **statement order** (no *do/does/did*):
“*When did they arrive?*” → He asked *when they had arrived*.
- **Yes/No questions** use **if / whether**:
“*Did they call?*” → He asked *if/whether they had called*.

Reported orders, requests & advice

- **tell/ask + object + to-infinitive** :
“*Give me the money.*” → He *told me to give* him the money.
- **Negative** : **told/asked + object + not to**
“*Don’t answer the door.*” → He *asked me not to answer* the door.
- Common patterns: *advise/warn/encourage/promise + object + to-infinitive* or *suggest + -ing / that + clause*.

Pronoun & reference changes

- First person becomes third person from the original speaker’s view: “*I will help you.*” → He said **he** would help **me**.
- Possessives change accordingly: “*That’s my pen.*” → She said it was **her** pen.

Keep pronouns if the speaker/listener haven’t changed (*You said, “I love you.” → You told me you loved me*).