



ENGLISH GRAMMAR MADE CLEAR

Reported Speech

How to pass on what people said, asked and told you to do, with plenty of practice and a full answer key.

She said she **was** busy

He asked if I **could** help

They told us **to wait**

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“Sound as capable in English as you are in your own language.”

What is reported speech?

We use **reported** (or **indirect**) **speech** to tell someone what another person said, without quoting their exact words. At work you do it all the time: in meetings, in emails and every time you pass on a message.

DIRECT SPEECH

the **exact** words

We repeat the words and use quotation marks.

"I am busy," she said.

"Can you help?" he asked.

REPORTED SPEECH

the **message**

We report the idea, usually moving the tense back and changing pronouns.

She said she was busy.

He asked if I could help.

REPORTING VERBS

say, tell + **more**

Verbs like *explain*, *suggest*, *promise* and *advise* summarize what was said.

She promised to call.

He suggested meeting later.

Three classic mistakes

- X She ~~said me~~ she was busy.
- X He asked where ~~was the office~~.
- X She ~~told~~ she would call.

- ✓ She **told me** she was busy.
- ✓ He asked where **the office was**.
- ✓ She **said** she would call.

Why is it so tricky to master?

- 1 **Tenses move back.** When the reporting verb is in the past, the verb usually goes one step back: *am* → *was*, *will* → *would*, *have done* → *had done*.
- 2 **Everything else shifts too.** Pronouns, time words and place words change with the point of view: *"I'll see you tomorrow"* → *She said she'd see me **the next day***.
- 3 **Say and tell work differently.** We *tell* **someone** something, but we *say* something (to someone).
- 4 **Reported questions use statement word order.** No *do* / *does* / *did* and no inversion: *He asked where I **lived***, not *where did I live*.
- 5 **Backshift isn't always needed.** If something is still true, or the reporting verb is in the present, you can keep the tense: *She says she **is** running late*.

The rules side by side

Tense changes

direct → reported

Direct speech	Reported speech
present simple "I <u>work</u> in sales."	past simple She said she <u>worked</u> in sales.
present continuous "I <u>m waiting</u> ."	past continuous He said he <u>was waiting</u> .
past simple "We <u>met</u> in May."	past perfect They said they <u>had met</u> in May.
present perfect "I <u>ve finished</u> ."	past perfect She said she <u>had finished</u> .
will "I <u>ll call</u> you."	would He said he <u>would call</u> me.
can "I <u>can</u> help."	could She said she <u>could</u> help.
must / have to "I <u>must</u> go."	had to He said he <u>had to</u> go.
may "It <u>may</u> rain."	might She said it <u>might</u> rain.

No change

would, could, should, might and the past perfect stay the same.

Other changes

time, place, people

Direct speech	Reported speech
now	then / at that time
today / tonight	that day / that night
tomorrow	the next day / the following day
yesterday	the day before / the previous day
next week	the following week
last week	the week before / the previous week
two days ago	two days before
here	there
this / these	that / those
I / we / my / our	he, she, they / his, her, their

Tip

Only change what makes sense. If you report something on the same day, *today* can stay *today*.

Reporting questions & commands no question word order

Yes / No questions

ask + **if / whether** + subject + verb
"Are you free?" → She asked **if I was** free.

Wh- questions

ask + **question word** + subject + verb
"Where do you work?" → He asked **where I worked**.

Commands & requests

tell / ask + person + **(not) to** + verb
"Don't be late." → She told us **not to be** late.

Say, tell & reporting verbs

Choosing the right reporting verb makes your English sound more natural and more precise than using *said* every time.

Say vs tell

the grammar

1 say + (that) + clause

She **said** (that) the meeting was canceled.

2 say something to someone

He **said** goodbye **to** everyone.

3 tell + person + (that) + clause

She **told me** (that) the meeting was canceled.

4 tell + person + to + verb

He **told us to wait** outside.

5 Fixed expressions with tell

tell the truth, tell a lie, tell a story, tell a joke, tell the time, tell the difference

Can you **tell the difference**?

When you don't need to backshift

- The information is still true: *He said the office **is** in Madrid.*
- The reporting verb is in the present: *She **says** she's running late.*
- You're reporting something just said: *"What did he say?" "He said he's busy."*

Reporting verbs

verb patterns

+ to + verb

AGREE, OFFER, PROMISE, REFUSE, THREATEN

She **offered to help**.

+ person + to + verb

ADVISE, ASK, ENCOURAGE, INVITE, REMIND, TELL, WARN

He **reminded me to send** it.

+ -ing

ADMIT, DENY, RECOMMEND, SUGGEST

She **suggested meeting** on Monday.

+ preposition + -ing

APOLOGIZE FOR, INSIST ON, ACCUSE SB OF,

CONGRATULATE SB ON

He **apologized for being** late.

+ (that) + clause

EXPLAIN, CONFIRM, MENTION, ADMIT, COMPLAIN, ANNOUNCE

They **confirmed that** the order had arrived.

Watch out

- suggest* is never followed by *to*: ~~He suggested to meet~~ → He suggested **meeting**.
- explain* needs *to* before the person: *She explained the plan to us.*

Exercises

1**Say or tell?**

Circle the correct option.

1. She **said / told** me the deadline had changed.
2. He **said / told** that he was working from home.
3. Can you **say / tell** me where the meeting room is?
4. The CEO **said / told** goodbye to the team.
5. I **said / told** them to send the invoice by Friday.
6. Please don't **say / tell** anyone about the merger yet.
7. What did the client **say / tell** about the proposal?
8. She always **says / tells** the truth.

2**Report the statements**

Rewrite each sentence in reported speech. Remember to change the tense, pronouns and time words.

1. "I'm working on the budget," said Anna.
Anna said _____
2. "We will launch the product in May," said the manager.
The manager said _____
3. "I've finished the report," said Tom.
Tom said _____
4. "I can't come to the meeting tomorrow," said Sara.
Sara said _____
5. "We sent the contract yesterday," said the supplier.
The supplier said _____
6. "I must leave early today," said Mark.
Mark said _____

Exercises

3

Time and place words

Complete the table with the reported speech form.

Direct	Reported	Direct	Reported
now		tomorrow	
today		yesterday	
here		next week	
this		three days ago	

4

Report the questions

Rewrite the questions in reported speech. Use statement word order!

- "Where do you live?" she asked me.
She asked me _____
- "Are you coming to the conference?" he asked us.
He asked us _____
- "What time does the train leave?" I asked.
I asked _____
- "Have you signed the contract?" the lawyer asked me.
The lawyer asked me _____
- "Why did you change the price?" the client asked us.
The client asked us _____

5

Use a reporting verb

Report each sentence using the verb in capitals.

- "I'll call you back later," he said. **PROMISED**
He _____
- "Sorry I'm late," she said. **APOLOGIZED**
She _____
- "You should update your CV," my manager said. **ADVISED**
My manager _____
- "Why don't we order lunch in?" said Paula. **SUGGESTED**
Paula _____

Exercises

6

Find the mistake

Some sentences are correct. Tick (✓) the correct ones and rewrite the others correctly.

1. She said me that she was tired.

☐

2. He asked me where did I work.

☐

3. They told us to not park there.

☐

4. The manager explained us the new policy.

☐

5. She asked if I could help her.

☐

6. He suggested to meet on Monday.

☐

7. I told that I would be late.

☐

8. She asked whether I had seen the email.

☐

7

Pass on the message

Read the voicemail. Then complete the message to your manager using reported speech.

"Hi, it's Paul from Brightline. I'm calling about the order. We can't deliver it on Friday because our driver is ill. I'll send you a new date tomorrow. Can you call me back?"

Paul from Brightline called. He said he ¹ _____ (call) about the order. He said they ² _____ (can't) deliver it on Friday because their driver ³ _____ (be) ill. He said he ⁴ _____ (send) us a new date ⁵ _____ (tomorrow). He asked if you ⁶ _____ (can) call him back.

Answer key

1 Say or tell?

- | | | | | | |
|---------|----------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| 1. told | 2. said | 3. tell | 4. said | 5. told | 6. tell |
| 7. say | 8. tells | | | | |

2 Report the statements

- Anna said (that) she **was working** on the budget.
- The manager said (that) they **would launch** the product in May.
- Tom said (that) he **had finished** the report.
- Sara said (that) she **couldn't come** to the meeting **the next day**.
- The supplier said (that) they **had sent** the contract **the day before**.
- Mark said (that) he **had to leave** early **that day**.

3 Time and place words

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1. now → then | 2. today → that day |
| 3. here → there | 4. this → that |
| 5. tomorrow → the next / following day | 6. yesterday → the day before / previous day |
| 7. next week → the following week | 8. three days ago → three days before |

4 Report the questions

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1. She asked me where I lived . | 2. He asked us if / whether we were coming to the conference. |
| 3. I asked what time the train left . | 4. The lawyer asked me if / whether I had signed the contract. |
| 5. The client asked us why we had changed the price. | |

5 Use a reporting verb

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1. He promised to call me back later. | 2. She apologized for being late. |
| 3. My manager advised me to update my CV. | 4. Paula suggested ordering lunch in. |

6 Find the mistake

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1. She told me / said to me that she was tired. | 2. He asked me where I worked . |
| 3. They told us not to park there. | 4. The manager explained the new policy to us . |
| 5. ✓ Correct | 6. He suggested meeting on Monday. |
| 7. I said that I would be late. / I told them that.. | 8. ✓ Correct |

7 Pass on the message

- | | | | |
|-----------------------------|-------------|--------|---------------|
| 1. was calling | 2. couldn't | 3. was | 4. would send |
| 5. the next / following day | 6. could | | |

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