

English grammar

Reported speech

Indirect (reported) speech in statements

If we want to report what other people said, thought or felt, we can use the direct or indirect (reported) speech.

The **direct speech**: *"I like it," he said. "Irene is late," he thought. "I will pass the exam," she hoped.*
The **indirect (reported) speech**: *He said he liked it. He thought that Irene was late. She hoped she would pass the exam.*

The indirect (reported) speech is typically introduced by verbs such as *say, tell, admit, complain, explain, remind, reply, think, hope, offer, refuse* etc.
He said (that) he didn't want it.
She explained that she had been at the seaside.

If the reporting verb is in the past tense, we change the following:

- a) verb tenses and verb forms,
- b) pronouns,
- c) the adverbs of time and place.

A) The changes of verb tenses in the indirect (reported) speech

1. Present - past

The present simple tense becomes the past simple tense and the present continuous becomes the past continuous.

"I never understand you," she told me. - She told me she never understood me.

"We are exercising," he explained. - He explained that they were exercising.

2. Present perfect - past perfect

The present perfect simple changes into the past perfect simple and the present perfect continuous changes into the past perfect continuous.

"I have broken the window," he admitted. - He admitted that he had broken the window.

"I have been waiting since the morning," he complained. - He complained that he had been waiting since the morning.

3. Past - past perfect

The past simple tense becomes the past perfect simple and the past continuous becomes the past perfect continuous.

"She went to Rome," I thought. - I thought that she had gone to Rome.

"He was thinking of buying a new car," she said. - She said he had been thinking of buying a new car.

4. Will - conditional

Will changes into the conditional.

"I will come on Sunday," he reminded me. - He reminded me that he would come on Sunday.

Notes

I shall, we shall usually become *would*.

"I shall appreciate it," he said. - He said he would appreciate it.

The first person conditional *I should, we should* usually changes into *would*.

"We should be really glad," she told us. - She told us they would be really glad.

May becomes *might*.

"I may write to him," she promised. - She promised that she might write to him.

The verb forms remain the same in the direct and indirect speech in the following cases.

1. If the reporting verb is in the present tense.

Bill: "I am enjoying my holiday." - Bill says he is enjoying his holiday.

Sandy: "I will never go to work." - Sandy says she will never go to work.

2. When we report something that is still true.

Dan: "Asia is the largest continent." - Dan said Asia is the largest continent.

Emma: "People in Africa are starving." - Emma said people in Africa are starving.

3. When the speech is made and reported at the same time and the fact is still true.

Michael: "I am thirsty." - Michael said he is thirsty.

4. With modal verbs *would*, *might*, *could*, *should*, *ought to*, *used to*.

George: "I would try it." - George said he would try it.

Mimi: "I might come." - Mimi said she might come.

Steve: "I could fail." - Steve said he could fail.

Linda: "He should/ought to stay in bed." - Linda said he should/ought to stay in bed.

Mel: "I used to have a car." - Mel said he used to have a car.

5. After *wish*, *would rather*, *had better*, *it is time*.

Margo: "I wish they were in Greece." - Margo said she wished they were in Greece.

Matt: "I would rather fly." - Matt said he would rather fly.

Betty: "They had better go." - Betty said they had better go.

Paul: "It is time I got up." - Paul said it was time he got up.

6. In if-clauses.

Martha: "If I tidied my room, my dad would be happy." - Martha said that if she tidied her room, her dad would be happy.

7. In time-clauses.

Joe: "When I was staying in Madrid I met my best friend." - He said that when he was staying in Madrid he met his best friend.

8. We do not change the past tense in spoken English if it is clear from the situation when the action happened.

"She did it on Sunday," I said. - I said she did it on Sunday.

We must change the tense, however, in the following sentence, otherwise it will not be clear whether we are talking about the present or past feelings.

"I hated her," he said. - He said he had hated her.

9. We do not usually change the modal verbs *must* and *needn't*. But *must* can become *had to* or *would have to* and *needn't* can become *didn't have to* or *wouldn't have to* if we want to express an obligation. *Would/wouldn't have to* are used to talk about future obligations.

"I must wash up." - He said he must wash up/he had to wash up.

"I needn't be at school today." - He said he needn't be/didn't have to be at school that day.

"We must do it in June." - He said they would have to do it in June.

If the modal verb *must* does not express obligation, we do not change it.

"We must relax for a while." (suggestion) - He said they must relax for a while.

"You must be tired after such a trip." (certainty) - He said we must be tired after such a trip.

B) The pronouns in the indirect (reported) speech

We have to change the pronouns in the indirect (reported) speech to keep the same meaning of a sentence.

"We are the best students," he said. - He said they were the best students.

"They called us," he said. - He said they had called them.

"I like your jeans," she said. - She said she liked my jeans.

"I can lend you my car," he said. - He said he could lend me his car.

Sometimes we have to use a noun instead of a pronoun, otherwise the reported speech is confusing.

"He killed them," Kevin said. - Kevin said that the man had killed them.

If we change the direct speech into the indirect speech mechanically (*Kevin said he had killed them*), it can have a different meaning - Kevin himself killed them.

This and *these* are usually substituted in the reported speech.

"They will finish it this year," he said. - *He said they would finish it that year.*

"I brought you this book," she said. - *She said she had brought me the book.*

"We want these flowers," they said. - *They said they wanted the flowers.*

C) Time and place

Let's suppose that we talked to our friend Mary on Friday. And she said: *"Greg came yesterday."* It means that Greg came on Thursday. If we report Mary's sentence on Sunday, we have to do the following:

Mary: "Greg came yesterday." - *Mary said that Greg had come the day before.*

If we say: *Mary said Greg had come yesterday*, it is not correct, because it means that he came on Saturday.

The time expressions change as follows.

today - that day, tomorrow - the next day/the following day, the day after tomorrow - in two days' time, yesterday - the day before, the day before yesterday - two days before, next week/month - the following week/month, last week/month - the previous week/month, a year ago - a year before/the previous year

Bill: "She will leave tomorrow." - *Bill said she would leave the next day.*

Sam: "She arrived last week." - *Sam said she had arrived the previous week.*

Julie: "He moved a year ago." - *Julie said he had moved a year before.*

Note

If the speech is made and reported at the same time, the time expressions can remain the same.

"I will go on holiday tomorrow," he told me today. - *He told me today he would go on holiday tomorrow.*

"We painted the hall last weekend," she told me this week. - *She told me this week they had painted the hall last weekend.*

On the other hand, if the speech is reported later than it is made, the time expressions are different in the indirect speech. Last week Jim said:

"I'm playing next week."

If we report his sentence a week later, we will say:

Jim said he was playing this week.

Here usually becomes *there* in the indirect speech. But sometimes we make different adjustments.

At school: "I'll be here at 10 o'clock," he said. - *He said he would be there at 10 o'clock.*

In Baker Street: "We'll meet here." - *He said they would meet in Baker Street.*

Reported questions

Questions become statements in the reported speech. The reporting verb *say* changes into *ask*, *want to know*, *wonder* ...

"Where have you been?" he said. - *He asked me where I had been.*

"What time did it start?" he said. - *He wanted to know what time it had started.*

"Why won't he do it?" she said. - *She wondered why he wouldn't do it.*

In yes/no questions we use *if* or *whether* in the **reported questions**. *If* is more common and *whether* is more formal.

"Will you come?" she asked me. - *She asked me if/whether I would come.*

"Did he marry Sue?" she said. - *She wondered if/whether he married Sue.*

Reported commands, requests and advice

The commands, requests and advice mostly have the same form in English: verb + object + infinitive.

The reporting verbs are *advise*, *ask*, *beg*, *forbid*, *order*, *persuade*, *recommend*, *tell*, *urge*, *warn* etc.

Unlike the direct speech the person addressed must be mentioned in the indirect speech.

"Get up!" he said. - He told me to get up.

"Please, revise for the test," he said. - He urged me to revise for the test.

"Put on your coat," I said. - I advised him to put on his coat.

Negative commands, requests and advice are reported by verb + object + not + infinitive.

"Don't hesitate," he said. - He persuaded me not to hesitate.

"Don't smoke," the doctor warned my father. - The doctor warned my father not to smoke.

Tell can introduce statements, commands, requests or advice. The form is different, however.

Reported statements with *tell*

"I'm leaving," he told me. - He told me that he was leaving.

Reported commands, requests or advice with *tell*

"Leave the room," he told John. - He told John to leave the room.

"Don't give up," the teacher told her students. - The teacher told the students not to give up.

Similarly *ask* is used in reported questions, commands, requests or advice in different forms.

Reported questions with *ask*

"Will you make coffee?" he said. - He asked me if I would make coffee.

Reported commands, requests or advice with *ask*

"Make coffee, please," he said. - He asked me to make coffee.

"Don't park in my place," Greg told me. - Greg asked me not to park in his place.