

Reported (Indirect) Speech: Discovering the rules

from *Practical English Usage*

First, do “Discovering the Rules.” Then, read the explanations. You can find the explanations from *Practical English Usage* below this exercise. After studying explanations, you can get review by 1) reading one of the explanation’s direct-speech sample sentences, 2) then saying that sentence in indirect speech, 3) and then comparing your indirect-speech sentence with the indirect-speech sentence in the explanation.

Discovering the Rules

1. Look at these sentences. The first sentence in each set is called “direct speech,” and the second sentence is “indirect speech,” one person reporting to another person what was said the day before. How many elements in the sentence change?

Monday	Bill to John:	I want to see Mary this afternoon.
Tuesday	John to Ann:	Bill told me yesterday that he wanted to see Mary that afternoon.

Thursday	Jack to Liz:	I don’t like this food. I wish I could have something else.
Friday	Liz to Ben:	Jack told me yesterday that he didn’t like that food, and that he wished he could have something else.

Now, can you report what Jill told Jake? Imagine that you are Jake telling Jill’s other boyfriend, Ben. (After you write your sentence, check “Answers” below. For an explanation, see 481.3,4 in *Practical English Usage*.)

Saturday	Jill to Jake:	I love Bill, and I have a date with him this evening.
Monday	Jake to Ben:	

2. Now look at these sentences.

Wednesday	Bill to Jack:	I am going to the library this afternoon.
Thursday	Jack to Ken:	Bill told me yesterday he was going to the library that afternoon.

Can you report what Zana told Jake? Imagine that you are Jake telling Zeke the nasty thing she said about him. (After you write your sentence, check “Answers” below. For an explanation, see 481.2,3,4,5 in *Practical English Usage*.)

Wednesday	Zana to Jake:	Oh, all right. I will meet Zeke tomorrow, but I don’t want to.
Sunday	Jake to Zeke:	

3. Look at these sentences.

Friday	Zane to Jane:	Will you do my homework for me as soon as you finish doing that?
Sunday	Jack to Zach	Zane asked Jane if/whether she would do his homework for him just as soon as she finished doing what she was doing. (Or: ...finished doing something.)

Can you report what Jack asked Zach, below? Imagine that you are Beth telling Pat. (After you write your sentence, check “Answers” below. For an explanation, see 481.6 in *Practical English Usage*.)

Tuesday	Jack to Zach:	Will you kindly treat me to an ice cream when we meet tomorrow?
Sunday	Beth to Pat:	

4. Look at these sentences.

October 10	Zane to Zeke	Where should I put these boxes?
October 13	Zeke to Jake	Zane asked me where he should put some/the/those boxes.

Can you report what John asked Joan, below? Imagine that you are Joan telling Tom. (After you write your sentence, check “Answers” below. For an explanation, see 481.6 in *Practical English Usage*.)

February 5	John to Joan	What time do you want me to come to your party?
February 9	Joan to Tom	

5. Look at these sentences.

March	Mr. Pit to Pete:	Take that book to the library right now.
April	Pete to Zeke:	Mr. Pit told me to take the book to the library right away.

Can you report what Pet told Pat to do, below? Imagine that you are Pat telling your teacher (you snitch!). (After you write your sentence, check “Answers” below. For an explanation, see 481.3,7 in *Practical English Usage*.)

May	Pet to Pat:	Do tomorrow’s homework for me, or I won’t forgive you for the rest of your life.
June	Pat to teacher:	

Answers

- Jake to Ben: Jill told me that she loved Bill, and that she had a date with him that evening. (Note the required *that* in the second clause. If we omit *that*, it would not be clear that Jill actually *told Jake* that she had a date with Bill.)
- Jake to Zeke: Zana told me she would meet you the next day, but she didn’t want to.
- Beth to Pat: Jack asked Zach if he would kindly treat him to an ice cream when they met the next (the following) day.
- Joan to Tom: John asked me what time I wanted him to come to my party.
- Pet to teacher: Pet told me to do the next day’s homework for her, or she wouldn’t forgive me for the rest of my life.

Practical English Usage (Michael Swan - Oxford)

481 reporting (2): basic rules for indirect speech 1 change of situation

1. Introduction

Words that are spoken or thought in one place by one person may be reported in another place at a different time, and perhaps by another person. Because of this, there are often grammatical differences between direct and indirect speech. These changes are mostly natural and logical, and it is NOT: necessary to learn complicated rules about indirect speech in English.

BILL (on Saturday evening): *I don’t like this party. I want to go home now.*

PETER (on Sunday morning): *Bill said that he didn’t like the party, and he wanted to go home right away.*

2. Pronouns

A change of speaker may mean a change of pronoun. In the example above, Bill says *I* to refer to himself. Peter, talking about what Bill said, naturally uses *he*.

Bill said that he didn’t like the party...

(NOT: *Bill said that I didn’t like the party...*)

3. 'Here and now' words

A change of place and time may mean changing words like *here, this, now, today*. Peter, reporting what Bill said, does NOT: use *this* and *now* because he is no longer at the party.

Bill said that he didn't like the party...
(NOT: ~~Bill said that he didn't like **this** party...~~)

Note that *next* and *last* are also 'here and now' words.

Original words	Reported words
<i>I'll be back next week.</i>	<i>She said she'd be back the next week, but I never saw her again.</i>
<i>I got my license last Tuesday.</i>	<i>He said he'd got his license the Tuesday before.</i>

4. Tenses

A change of time may mean a change of tense: the person reporting *usually* uses tenses that relate to the time when he/she is making the report, NOT to the time of the direct speech.

*Bill said that he **didn't** like the party...*
(NOT: ~~Bill said that he **doesn't** like the party...~~)

So after past reporting verbs, the verbs of the original speech are usually "backshifted" — made more past. Compare:

Original words	Reported words
<i>Will you marry me?</i>	<i>I asked him if he would marry me. (NOT: ...if he will marry me.)</i>
<i>You look nice.</i>	<i>I told her she looked nice. (NOT: I told her she looks nice.)</i>
<i>I can't swim.</i>	<i>He pretended he couldn't swim. (NOT: He pretended he can't swim.)</i>
<i>I'm learning French.</i>	<i>She said she was learning French. (NOT: She said she is learning French.)</i>
<i>I've forgotten.</i>	<i>He said he had forgotten. (NOT: He said he has forgotten.)</i>
<i>John phoned.</i>	<i>She told me that John (had) phoned.</i>

Sometimes this means that past verbs are used to talk about the present or the future.

*Your mother **said** that I **could** play here today.*
*I **wondered** how you **were**.' 'You can see how I am.'*
*I **knew** you **were** American.*
*Sorry, I **didn't realize** this **was** your seat.*

After present, future and present perfect reporting verbs, tenses are usually the same as in the original (because there is no important change of time).

*He **says** he **doesn't** want to play any more.*
*I'll **tell** her your idea **is** great.*
*The government **has announced** that taxes **will be raised**.*

5. Dropping that

The conjunction *that* is often dropped, especially after common reporting verbs (e.g. *say, think*) in informal speech.

*She said **(that)** she'd had enough.*
*I think **(that)** you're probably right.*

That cannot be dropped after certain verbs (e.g. *reply, telegraph, shout*), and it is NOT: usually dropped after nouns.

*I **replied that** I did NOT: intend to stand for election.*
(NOT: ~~I replied I did NOT: intend...~~)
She shouted that she was busy.
(NOT: ~~She shouted she was busy.~~)
He disagreed with Copernicus's view that the earth went round the sun.
(NOT: ~~...Copernicus's view the earth went...~~)

6. Questions and answers

In reported questions the subject normally comes before the verb in standard English, and auxiliary *do* is NOT: used (except in negative questions—see 482.7). The same structure is used for reporting the answers to questions, and in other uses of question-word clauses.

*He wanted to know when I **was** leaving.*
(NOT: ~~...when **was** I leaving.~~)
*I asked **where** the president and his wife **were** staying.*
(NOT: ~~[...asked **where were** the president and his wife...]~~)

I knew how **they felt**.

(NOT: ...~~how did they feel.~~)

Nobody told me why **I had** to sign the paper.

(NOT: ...~~why did I have to sign~~)

How **you get** there is your problem.

(NOT: ~~How do you get there...~~)

Question marks are NOT: used in reported questions.

We asked where the money was.

(NOT: ...~~where the money was?~~)

Yes/no questions are reported with *if* or *whether* (for the difference, see 593).

The driver asked **if/whether** I wanted the town centre.

I don't know **if/whether** I can help you.

Say and *tell* are not used to report questions.

NOT: ~~The driver said whether I wanted the town centre.~~

But *say* and *tell* can introduce the answers to questions.

Please **say** whether you want the town centre.

He never **says** where he's going.

I **told** her what time it was.

For the difference between *say* and *tell*, see 4B7. For more about question-word clauses, see 460.5.

7. Actions: promises, orders, requests, advice etc.

Speech relating to actions (e.g. promises, agreements, orders, offers, requests, advice and suggestions) is often reported with infinitives, or object + infinitive.

"I'll write," he promised me. → He promised **to write**. (OR He promised me he **would write**.)

She agreed **to wait** for me.

I told **Andrew to be** careful.

The lady downstairs has asked **us to be** quiet after nine o'clock.

Ann has offered **to baby-sit** tonight.

I advise **you to think** again before you decide.

The policeman told me not to park there.

The structure question word + infinitive is common (see 288).

He asked her **how to make** a white sauce. Don't tell me **what to do**.

We do not use infinitive structures after *suggest* or (usually) after *say*. However, after these and many other verbs, instructions, etc., can be reported with *that*-clauses, usually with modal verbs (see 344) or subjunctives (see 541).

He suggested **that I try** the main car park. (NOT ~~He suggested me to try...~~)

The policeman said **that I mustn't** park there.

(NOT ~~The policemen said me not to park there.~~)

I told Andrew **that he ought to be** careful.

For *ought*, *must* and other modal verbs in indirect speech, see 482.5.

For *suggest*, see 545.

For the structures that are possible after particular verbs, see a good dictionary.

482 reporting (3): advanced points

2. Indirect speech: word order with *what*, *who* and *which*

When we report questions constructed with *who/what/which* + *be* + complement, *be* is put after the complement in standard speech, but in colloquial speech *be* is occasionally put before the complement.

Direct	Who's the best player here?
Indirect	She asked me who was the best player .
	She asked me who the best player was .
Direct	What's the matter?
Indirect	I asked what was the matter .
	I asked what the matter was .
Direct	Which is my seat?
Indirect	She wondered which was her seat .
	She wondered which her seat was .

3. Indirect speech: reporting past tenses

In indirect speech, a speaker's present perfect and past tenses are often reported using past perfect tenses (because the reported event — the event he/she spoke about — happened before the event that caused

reporting of the reported event, and because the reporter's point of view is not the same as the original speaker's point of view).

Direct	<i>I've just written to John.</i>
Indirect	<i>She told me she had just written to John. (The event that caused reporting might be that I asked her whether John knew about their new house.)</i>
Direct	<i>I saw Penny at the theatre a couple of days ago.</i>
Indirect	<i>In his letter, he said he'd seen Penny at the theatre a couple of days before. (Seeing Penny has some relationship with his writing the letter or with some related event in the letter.)</i>

It is often unnecessary, and even sounds wrong, to show the time relationship between the events spoken about and the original speech. When this is so — when there is no relationship between the reporting event (e.g., “said”) and the reported event, or when the reporter sees the past events from the same point of view as the original speaker — past perfect tenses are not used.

*This man on TV said that dinosaurs **were** around for 250 million years. (NOT . . . ~~that dinosaurs had been around.~~)*

*I told you John **phoned** this morning, didn't I?*

*We were glad to hear you **enjoyed** your trip to Denmark.*

How about a situation with present perfect? If there are two events in the context (even if one isn't stated), use past perfect for the earlier one.

Direct	Base sentence (The WNYN Story, Dialog 2): <i>I don't think he's come in yet.</i>
Indirect	Margaret told Grace that she didn't think David had come in yet. (In this context, one event is their meeting and discussing, and the other event is “come.”)

NOT . . . *didn't think David has come in yet.*

4. Indirect speech: reporting present and future tenses

If somebody talked about a situation that has still not changed—that is to say, if the original speaker's present and future are still present and future—a reporter can often choose whether to keep the original speaker's tenses or change them. Both structures are common.

Direct	<i>The earth goes round the sun.</i>
Indirect	<i>He proved that the earth goes/went round the sun.</i>
Direct	<i>How old are you?</i>
Indirect	<i>Are you deaf? I asked how old you are/were.</i>
Direct	<i>Where does she work?</i>
Indirect	<i>I've often wondered where she works/worked.</i>
Direct	<i>It will be windy tomorrow.</i>
Indirect	<i>The forecast said it will/would be windy tomorrow.</i>

We do not keep the original speaker's tenses if we do not agree with what he / she said, if we are not certain of its truth, or if we wish to make it clear that the information comes from the original speaker, not from ourselves.

*The Greeks thought that the sun **went** round the earth. (NOT: ...~~that the sun goes round the earth.~~)*

*Did you hear that? She just said she **was** fourteen!*

*He announced that profits **were** higher than forecast.*

5. Modal verbs in indirect speech

The models *would*, *should*, *could*, *might*, *ought* and *must* are usually unchanged after past reporting verbs in indirect speech. This is also true of modal *need* (see 357) and *had better* (see 234).

Direct	<i>It would be nice if I could see you again.</i>
Indirect	<i>He said it would be nice if he could see me again.</i>
Direct	<i>It might be too late.</i>
Indirect	<i>I was afraid that it might be too late.</i>
Direct	<i>It must be pretty late. I really must go.</i>
Indirect	<i>She said it must be pretty late and she really must go.</i>
Direct	<i>You needn't pretend to be sorry.</i>
Indirect	<i>I said he needn't pretend...</i>

First-person *shall* and conditional *should* may be reported as *would* in indirect speech (because of the change of person).

Direct *We **shall/should** be delighted to come.*
Indirect *They said they **would** be delighted to come.*

Note the different ways of reporting questions beginning *Shall I...?* (depending on whether the speaker is asking for information or making an offer)..

Direct ***Shall** I be needed tomorrow?*
Indirect *He wants to know if he **will** be needed tomorrow.*
Direct ***Shall** I carry your bag?*
Indirect *He wants to know if he **should/can** carry your bag.*

future in the past

Don't change future in the past.

Base sentence: They promised we'd have the complete report in a couple of weeks.

Wrong: Margaret told Grace that they promised they would have had the complete...

Right: Margaret told Grace that they promised they'd have the complete...

6. Conditionals

After past reporting verbs, conditional sentences referring to 'unreal' situations are often reported with past conditionals.

Direct *If I **had** any money I'd **buy** you a drink.*
Indirect *She said if she **had had** any money she **would have bought** me a drink. (OR:
 *She said if she **had** any money she **would** buy...)**

7. Negative questions

Do can be used in indirect negative questions, as a negative auxiliary.

Direct *'Why **don't** you work harder?'*
Indirect *She asked why he **didn't** work harder.*

Note that negative questions often express emotions such as surprise or enthusiasm (see 360), and these are usually reported in special ways.

Direct *Don't the children like ice-cream?*
Indirect *She **was surprised that** the children didn't like ice-cream. (NOT: ~~She asked if the~~
 ~~children didn't like ice-cream.~~)*
Direct *Isn't she lovely!*
Indirect *I **remarked how** lovely she was. (NOT: ~~I asked if she wasn't lovely.~~)*